SURVEILLANCE AND THE WORK OF ANTITRAFFICKING

From Compulsory Examination to International Coordination

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By hailing different configurations of women as objects and subjects of surveillance, the long history of efforts to uncover and combat the “traffic in women” offers an instructive case for feminist surveillance studies at this important moment of field formation. If a feminist critique and modification of an already existing yet discernibly unfeminist surveillance studies through a focused attention on women under surveillance is the task at hand, we might attend to how public outcry against the traffic in women has activated and rationalized state scrutiny and control over female bodies when it comes to disease, sexuality, morality, and labor. The Contagious Disease Acts (1864, 1866, 1869) in England created a “morality police” and authorized officers to subject women suspected of prostitution to compulsory “surgical examination” for venereal disease and forced confinement in a “lock hospital” if they were infected. This example reminds us to bear in mind the historical layers of targeted material-corporeal violence that conditions more contemporary technologically mediated and disembodied modes of surveillance.

The history of antitrafficking compels attention to the transnational and racist dimensions of the surveillance of women. The practices of compulsory examination, treatment, and detention of local women were a crucial component of British colonial administration throughout Asia in the early 1800s. With the spread of imperial settlements and the surge of international labor migrations in the second half of the nineteenth century, borders and transit hubs such as ports and railway stations came to be seen as dangerous vectors in the transmission of disease, especially from the colonies to the metropoles. While the sensationalist discourse of “white slave traffic” engendered sympathetic figurations of female vulnerability, it also fueled and justified suspicious regard of traveling female bodies. Alarm about the high rates of venereal diseases among soldiers in the First World War (1914–1918) galvanized a new round of concerted state actions to monitor and regulate transnational female movement and sexual labor (Gorman 2008, 200).

The early history of antitrafficking includes determined efforts by certain women to contest state tactics of state surveillance as discriminatory and dehumanizing in what
we might identify as a determinedly anti-surveillance feminism. An oft-repeated account traces the origin of the international movement against the “traffic in women” to the concerted opposition to the Contagious Disease Acts. On the other hand, if we follow the suggestion of Ummni Khan’s essay in this volume, where a distinctive form of “feminist surveillance” is the phenomenon under critical scrutiny, we should attend to how the antitrafficking work of women social reformers and feminist activists have aided and abetted state scrutiny and control over both female and male bodies. The feminist project of making women and gender visible within and across numerous disciplines and interdisciplinary studies is rendered especially contradictory when articulated in terms of a knowledge field that starts off from the problematization of visibility as a mode of subjection and regulation. Surveillance betrays and degrades the liberatory promise of visibility.

Then too, trafficking frustrates the sweeping reach of surveillance. As one of the most hyperbolized and enduring subjects of journalistic exposés, academic scholarship, government investigations, and international relations, the traffic in women bears an immense and prolific archive of documentation and analysis. However, as activists, policymakers, and academic experts have repeatedly pointed out, the clandestine, coercive, dispersed, and mobile aspects of trafficking resist unequivocal verification and clear representation. The archive of antitrafficking offers up a long, jagged history of both diverse surveillance rationales and tactics, as well as multiple surveillance failures and impossibilities. In this essay I argue that a persistent racist preoccupation with the fate of white women demarcates one such fault line. Even as the invocation of a generic “traffic in women and girls” in the early twentieth century expanded the reach of the problem and the corresponding modalities of vigilance, state and civil surveillance of trafficking have always been differentially entrained on different female bodies as vulnerable or dangerous.

The work of antitrafficking in the League of Nations during the interwar period is particularly instructive for examining the multiple contradictions outlined above. The League served as an important historical and institutional pivot between the imperial regimes carried over from the nineteenth century and the post-Second World War emergence of newly decolonized countries and the global governance regime associated with the United Nations. In the aftermath of the First World War, the traffic in women occasioned a compelling rationale and platform for the coming together of nations with divergent interests, shifting borders, and unequal resources. From its inception, the League of Nations was engaged with addressing the traffic as an urgent and indisputably international problem. Article 23c of its covenant thus “entrusted the League with the general supervision over the execution of agreements with regard to the traffic in women and children.” Calibrating the surveillance of women’s cross-border movements among states and nongovernmental organizations was crucial to the incipient conceptualization and enactment of international cooperation. From 30 June to 1 July 1921, the League convened an International Conference on the Traffic in Women and Children in Geneva. In his opening speech, the Belgian foreign minister Paul Hymans heralded the occasion: “Hitherto treaties of peace have only dealt with questions of frontiers, indemnities and commercial and financial interests. For the first time in the history of humanity other interests are therein included and among them the dignity of human labor and the respect for women and children” (quoted in Metzger 2007, 59). In the spirit of this new internationalism, it was suggested that the phrase “traffic in women and children” replace “white slavery,” thereby “making it clear that measures adopted should be applied to all races alike” (League of Nations 1927, 8). Such universalizing platitudes obscured the imperial genealogy, with its persistent
racial demarcations and national interests, of the discriminating and targeted surveillance of women's bodies, sexuality, work, and migration. In principle, the framing of the traffic in women as a global human problem necessitating international cooperation and coordination rendered these member states and their varied laws and policies regarding sex work, labor, age of consent, emigration, and immigration the target of a new supranational regime of surveillance, judgment, and proper accreditation. This framing held out the potential of clarifying the uneven sexual economies and topographies, which had been carved out by racism, patriarchy, and competing empires. In practice, however, even after the move to replace “white slave traffic” with the more neutral and inclusive “traffic in women,” a distinction and separation continued between “white women” and their racialized others. Persistent racial obsessions and racist blind spots impeded and exposed the limits of the League’s attempts to coordinate international policy and action against the traffic in women by implementing what were deemed newly effective modes of undercover surveillance and expert data gathering.

On 15 December 1920, the Assembly of the League of Nations adopted several linked resolutions. In addition to urging those governments who had signed the 1904 agreement and the 1910 Convention for the Suppression of White Slave Traffic to put them into operation “immediately,” another resolution called on the League’s Council to convene an International Conference of Traffic in Women and Children, which would be charged with the “task of endeavouring to harmonise the opinions of the different Governments in order that common action may be taken” (League of Nations 1921b, 596). Toward that end, the Assembly authorized the Secretariat to issue to all member states a questionnaire that inquired about domestic laws regarding trafficking, the penalties prescribed for specific cases, and statistics for prosecutions and convictions. The 1921 International Conference in Geneva concluded with the recommendation that each member nation submit annual reports on both the traffic in their territories and their domestic antitrafficking efforts. The League of Nations thus took on the role of an international clearinghouse. It also passed a new, more expansive International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children in September 1921, which increased the age of consent of women engaged in prostitution from twenty to twenty-one. The League also appointed a permanent Advisory Committee on the Traffic of Women and Children, comprising nine national “delegates” and five “assessors,” each representing an international voluntary organization. When the League sponsored its own official investigation of the traffic in the 1920s, it proceeded in two stages and resulted in two separate publications. The first, published in 1927 and titled Report of the Special Body of Experts on Traffic in Women and Children (hereafter, the 1927 Report), comprised 270 pages. The second report, published in 1932 and titled Commission of Enquiry into Traffic in Women and Children in the East (hereafter, the 1932 Report), was much longer, at 556 pages. Paul Knepper has hailed the two inquiries together as not only “the first worldwide study of human trafficking” but also “the first ever social scientific study of a global social problem” (2011, 96).

The 1927 Report was notable for inaugurating the use of a traveling commission, which comprised specially trained “experts” who visited 112 cities and districts across twenty-eight countries to conduct “on the spot” inquiries. In addition to producing first-person observations of local conditions, these experts interviewed over 6,500 individuals, including government officials, law-enforcement officers, and antitrafficking voluntary associations in these locations. The commission also relied on undercover investigations by specially contracted agents and sometimes met directly
with members of the “underworld,” including procurers, madams, and prostitutes, in order to uncover “facts” that might be hidden or misrepresented by official statistics and national reports. Thus, the 1927 Report was held up at the time as having “revolutionized League methods in the investigation of social problems” (Boeckel 1929, 234).

Three specific aspects of these two reports compromise the claims to both their international expansiveness and their empirical innovations. First, both reports were blatantly concerned with the fate of white women. The 1932 Report is especially striking on this point in its clear demarcation between “Traffic in Occidental Women in Asia” and “Traffic in Asian Women” and in its unabashed concern about the sexual fate of Russian women refugees in China. This provides evidence that the imperialist, racist, and nationalist foundations of early British state regulation of and voluntary vigilance against prostitution from the nineteenth century preconditioned the later antitrafficking work of the League of Nations. Second, there was a specifically American genealogy for the 1927 Report’s use of “on the spot” and “undercover” investigations, which had been deployed earlier as part of the “social hygiene” movement in the United States. Third, there were substantive differences in methodology and composition between the two reports, which demonstrate the epistemological blind spots imposed by persistent racist and racist thinking.

I

The League’s racially motivated and demarcated handling of the traffic in women must be framed in relation to a longer history of imperial expansion, labor exploitation, and gendered labor migration in the nineteenth century. Well before the domestic enactment of the Contagious Disease Acts in England in the 1860s, the practices of medical surveillance, forced treatment, and physical isolation of women were a crucial component of British colonial administration throughout Asia in the early 1800s. A lock hospital was established in the Madras presidency in 1805, and others could be found throughout the British Empire in Asia, including in Penang, in the Malay Peninsula (Burton 1994, 130). In her comprehensive study Prostitution, Race, and Politics, Philippa Levine writes, “It is in India, however, that we see the workings of the early system most vividly.” Levine continues: “William Burke, inspector general of hospitals for the army in India, outlined his ideal plan in 1827: a register of prostitutes; their compulsory examination fortnightly, with certification for the healthy and hospitalization for the infected; and punitive measures for women failing to appear for examination. These principles would become the core of the empire wide regime enacted three decades later” (2003, 38).¹ Thereafter, Hong Kong’s Ordinance No. 12 was passed, in 1857, which mandated brothel registration and regular medical examination. Since “the ultimate goal of regulated prostitution was to provide ‘clean native women’ for foreign military personnel,” the ordinances in Hong Kong were “effectively limited to Asian women servicing foreigners” (Scully 2001, 81–82). British-administered lock hospitals could also be found throughout Asia, including treaty ports in Japan.

In addition to the presence of British colonists and soldiers throughout Asia, several significant migrations in the nineteenth century shaped the peculiar contours of the 1932 Report. A migratory route of women who were “typically already professional sex workers” from Europe and the U.S. to China began with the Opium War (1841–1842) and accelerated after the introduction of steamship travel and the
opening of the Suez Canal, in 1869 (Scully 2001, 79). The rapid economic development of port cities like Hong Kong and Singapore was accompanied by the growth of large red-light districts employing mostly Chinese and Japanese women, which were tolerated by colonial authorities as a “necessary evil” to placate the large population of migrant male laborers (Warren 1993, 34). In her account of the “traffic in sexual labor,” Eileen Scully (2001) includes Chinese women’s immigration to the United States in the 1840s as an early example of the traffic, and she further points to the presence of Chinese and Japanese women in Latin America, Southeast Asia, Australia, and South Africa by the late 1800s. Borders, ports, and other transit zones came to be regarded as especially dangerous and were closely monitored to ward off diseases. The increasingly vociferous discourse of venereal disease as a “racial poison” and a “racial threat” in the 1860s coincided with an actual decline in infections (Levine 2003, 5). This setup expressed anxieties about racial purity in the face of both increased white female emigration and the immigration of nonwhite others.

The authors of the 1927 Report acknowledge its link to earlier strands of antitrafficking work and its internationalization, which began in England and Western Europe in the nineteenth century. In 1869 Josephine Butler and other reformers founded the Ladies National Association (LNA) for the Repeal of the Contagious Disease Acts. Regarding the compulsory physical examinations as “symbolic rape,” the LNA “meticulously kept track of the number of examinations in which no venereal disease was discovered” and considered them to be “the central inequity of the Acts” (Bristow 1977, 82–83). Butler later established the British, Continental, and General Abolitionist Federation, in 1875, which extended the movement to abolish licensed brothels to the continent, since it was believed that the system of state-regulated prostitution in certain continental countries like France encouraged and facilitated the cross-national trafficking of women and girls. The federation convened an International Congress in 1877 and played a crucial role in sponsoring and financially underwriting targeted and on-the-ground investigations of the traffic. The 1927 Report mentions how their efforts led to an official British inquiry into the traffic of women and girls to the continent, which in turn resulted in the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment, as a model precedent for how concerted investigations could lead to effective regulation.

After the repeal of domestic laws in 1889, the continued use of contagious-diseases ordinances in the British colonies and protectorates shifted the focus of antitrafficking measures to these overseas territories. The British, Continental, and General Abolitionist Federation was renamed the British Committee for the Abolition of the State Regulated Vice in India and throughout the British Dominions. In addition to interviewing soldiers returning from abroad, the organization employed both paid agents and voluntary supporters, who conducted investigations in India in 1891 and 1892, and also in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and the Straits Settlements (Levine 2003, 104). The work of antitrafficking enjoined and enabled certain Anglo American women to participate actively in an early form of transnational knowledge production that predated and presaged the League of Nations inquiries. In 1882 Butler personally encouraged the American missionaries Elizabeth Wheeler Andrew and Katharine Bushnell, of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, to undertake an onsite investigation of trafficking and regulated brothels in India, which was later published as The Queen’s Daughters in India (1899). Andrew and Bushnell reported that “regulation was rampant and that Indian women submitted rather than face expulsion from the cantonments” (Burton 1994, 136). It is significant to note that their vigilant gaze was also trained on the imperial state and its “sanctioning of incorrigible soldierly
behavior” (Levine 2003, 104).

In the 1890s there emerged another strand of antitrafficking work in Britain that was affiliated with social-purity reformers, who advocated for the state oversight and regulation of prostitution. The National Vigilance Association (NVA) began to organize an international campaign against “white slave traffic” and garnered the support and endorsement of state officials. It also convened an International Congress on White Slave Traffic in London, in June 1899, which the 1927 Report hailed as “the starting-point of a complete organization for defensive and active measures against the traffic” (League of Nations 1927, 8). The NVA spearheaded a new organization, named the International Bureau (IB) for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women, which fostered “a close and permanent agreement . . . among the philanthropic and charitable societies of different countries to communicate to each other information as to the emigration of women under suspicious circumstances, and to undertake to protect the emigrants on their arrival.”2 The various national committees of the IB became actively engaged in the work of monitoring and managing the transnational movements of European women. In addition to being prominently led by men, the NVA and the IB cultivated and enjoyed a close relationship to the state. They received some financial support from their respective governments and also worked with law enforcement and immigration officials in the exclusion and repatriation of foreign women suspected of being prostitutes (Limoncelli 2006, 51). Such heightened vigilance did not, however, translate into increased protection of women from exploitation. Writing of the period from 1895 to the First World War, Scully points out, “Policing and regulatory responses exacerbated the situation, as migratory prostitutes under siege became more reliant on pimps and more vulnerable to corrupt officials” (Scully 2001, 84).

The IB played a leading role in coordinating the first International Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic, which was signed on 18 May 1904, as well as the 1910 International Convention for the Suppression of White Slave Traffic, which the League of Nations later adopted and expanded. Under the auspices of antitrafficking, both the 1904 and 1910 documents asserted the signatory state’s responsibility for monitoring the transnational movement of girls and women. According to Article 1 of the 1904 Agreement, the signatory countries would “establish or name some authority charged with the co-ordination of all information relative to the procuring of women or girls for immoral purposes abroad” (League of Nations 1927, 197). Article 2 called for the parties “to have a watch kept, especially in railways stations, ports of embarkation, and en route, for persons in charge of women and girls destined for an immoral life” (ibid.). This concerted surveillance over traveling female bodies was later incorporated almost verbatim in the questionnaire that the League of Nations circulated in 1921: “4. Has the government taken any steps to have ports and railway stations watched for the purpose of checking the Traffic in Women and Children? If not undertaking this duty to themselves, have they delegated this responsibility, and if so, to what agency?” (League of Nations 1921a, 230). Articles 3 and 4 of the 1904 Agreement, which addressed the matter of the repatriation of “women and girls of foreign nationality who are prostitutes,” were incorporated as question 5: “Has the Government taken steps to ascertain from foreign prostitutes the reasons for which they left their countries? If so, what has been the outcome of this enquiry?” (ibid.). The internationalization of the work of antitrafficking necessitated the move from “white slave traffic” to the more universal rubric of the “traffic in women and children,” but much of the discourse and subsequent work of the League of Nations maintained a hierarchical racial distinction. Question 8 in the 1921 questionnaire explicitly focused on protective measures against “White Slave Traffic.”
Several annual government reports also continued to deploy the term white slave traffic was not residual but crucial to the fashioning of international consensus in an era marked by both imperialist jockeying and uneven nation formations. In proposing a new International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children at the second meeting of the Assembly of the League in September 1921, the British delegation framed it as “an unprecedented opportunity for the League to demonstrate political will and determination” (Metzger 2007, 60). The 1921 Convention bore a notable exception in its Article 14: “Any Member or State signing the present Convention may declare that the signature does not include any or all of its colonies, overseas possessions, protectorates or territories under its sovereignty or authority, and may subsequently adhere separately on behalf of any such colony, overseas possession, protectorate or territory so excluded in its declaration.” Thus, the very assertion of a new international agreement entailed explicit sanctions of imperial “double standards” imposed onto different women’s bodies.

II

The exercise of the League’s “political will and determination” was further complicated by the unknowable contours of the purported problem. Trafficking is difficult to espy, document, and control. The two reports and the archives of the League of Nations Official Journal repeatedly demonstrate a fissure between convincing demonstrations of diligent surveillance and acknowledgment of the impossibility of a thorough monitoring and documentation of the phenomenon. Since the League, and especially its Social Section which included the Advisory Committee on the Traffic of Women and Children, lacked the financial resources and administrative structure to gather specific details about local and national conditions, it was still largely dependent on official government communiqués and “field reports” submitted by voluntary associations such as the IB. There was the possibility for underreporting the extent and severity of the conditions by state authorities. Pointing to how several of the countries represented on the advisory committee, including France, Italy, and Japan, did not move toward abolition in practice, Jessica Pliley goes so far as to assert “that many governments wanted to appear [to be] actively addressing the problem of trafficking without having to take any meaningful action” (2010, 105–6).

Further complicating questions of objectivity and accountability, Great Britain, France, Portugal, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United States submitted replies and reports on behalf of their colonies, overseas possessions, protectorates, or territories. As well, in the first decades of the twentieth century, many nations were in the active and contested process of state-building, making it difficult to attribute such reports to a single, organized bureaucratic agency. In her study of prostitution in Shanghai in the early twentieth century, Gail Hershatter points out that “no systematic statistics were collected” and further questions the record-keeping practices of the state: “Counting, like classifying and regulating, is not a neutral activity. The creation of statistics, in Shanghai as elsewhere, was part of a state-building process, an intrusive aspect of the project of modernity, often resisted by the people it sought to incorporate. Numbers that give the impression of precision were collected by an inconsistent group for changing reasons from a population that had every reason to lie” (1997, 38). There was also some skepticism about the “field reports” of voluntary organizations, a tendency to dismiss them as exaggerated and sensationalistic.
On 21 March 1923, Grace Abbott, an advisory-committee representative from the United States, submitted a memorandum recommending a new international enquiry sponsored by the League. Its scope would be ambitiously broad and multidimensional.

Geographically the investigation should include, if possible, the principal cities of the world, but, if this is not possible, typical cities should be selected from which there is reason to believe the traffic is or is not being carried on, those in which regulated houses and those in which abolition is the policy, those situated in countries in which prostitutes and all those who live or benefit by prostitution are excluded from admission, and those whose laws regulating immigration make no or inadequate provisions for immoral persons. (League of Nations 1927, 50)

Note how three different kinds of cities were delineated according to state regulations regarding prostitution and immigration restriction, suggesting that an assessment of the efficacy of state regulation itself was at stake. The rubric of “traffic in women” thus enabled a more far-reaching and probing investigation into a broad range of national laws and enforcement mechanisms. Abbott went on to call for the need for an on-the-ground investigation to supplement the limits of the information provided by governments and voluntary associations.

From official sources, the facts as to the administration of laws designed to eliminate the traffic can be learned. To secure the information as to the traffic itself, it will be necessary to send to the cities included in the survey, agents of high standing with special training and experience to make personal and unofficial investigations. It is recognised that such investigations are difficult, not to say dangerous; but they are absolutely necessary to secure the facts to refute sensational exaggerations or general denials as to the traffic and—what would seem to be for the Committee of supreme importance—an intelligent basis for a sound programme for international co-operation for the suppression of the traffic, if it is found to exist. (Ibid.)

Having earned a master’s degree in political science from the University of Chicago and worked with Jane Adams at Hull House, Abbott was a prominent member of a new generation of social workers who “crafted their professional identities and asserted their expertise by embracing scientific practice methods, with an emphasis on investigation, detailed case records, scientific nomenclature, and social diagnosis” (Kennedy 2008, 28). Before serving as the director of the Immigrant’s Protective League and being appointed as the first chief of the U.S. Children’s Bureau, Abbott had published numerous articles, in such venues as the American Journal of Sociology, on a range of issues, including immigrant labor, social welfare, child labor, and juvenile delinquency. Thus, her important role in proposing these investigations demonstrate the early twentieth-century commingling and cooperation of the state, the university, and private philanthropy in the work of surveillance over certain women’s bodies.

In addition to Abbott’s instigation, the leading position of U.S. actors in overseeing and funding this investigation merits closer scrutiny, especially given that the United States was not a formal member of the League of Nations. As proof and as a model of the efficaciousness of the investigation, Abbott invoked in the memorandum a U.S. Senate inquiry on the “Importation and Harbouring of Women for Immoral Purposes”
in 1908–1909, which found that women and girls from Europe and also from Asia were brought to the United States. She stated that “the authorities charged with the enforcement of American law as well as private organisations in the United States interested in the abolition of prostitution will, I am sure, be glad to give all possible assistance” (League of Nations 1927, 50). As appreciatively acknowledged in the introduction to the 1927 Report, both multinational investigations were made possible by donations from the American Bureau of Social Hygiene, which provided $75,000 and then $125,000, respectively, to the two inquiries. The Bureau of Social Hygiene (BSH) was established in 1913 by John D. Rockefeller Jr. and fellow “social purity” reformers as a private philanthropic organization devoted to investigating and combating prostitution. Rockefeller had previously served as the chair of a special grand jury commissioned by the County of New York, in 1910, to investigate the “organized traffic in women for immoral purposes.” Subsequently, he envisioned that “this permanent organization, small and operating in relative secrecy, would have some power to effect a solution to the social evil that a more open democratic process would not have” (Gunn 1999, 104). In contrast to the moralism and sensationalism of the earlier purity crusades against the “white slave traffic,” the BSH sought to achieve “instrumental reform that was efficient, scientific, elitist” by engaging trained experts to study social problems such as prostitution and venereal disease (Brandt 1987, 39). Before providing financial support for the League’s inquiries into the traffic in women, the BSH funded investigations into prostitution in the United States and Europe and published the findings (Kneeland 1913; Flexner 1914; Woolston, 1921). The BSH also financed social programs, such as the Laboratory of Social Hygiene in Bedford Hills: “Women sentenced to this reformatory underwent a battery of physical and psychological tests aimed at isolating factors which contributed to prostitution” (Brandt 1987, 39). Thus, the emerging methods of the social sciences came to supplement and legitimate rather than supplant older private and public modes of discipline and punishment.

The BSH also funded the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA), which merged two older organizations, the American Federation for Sex Hygiene and the American Vigilance Association, and focused on combating venereal disease through sex education. The ASHA was led by William F. Snow, a professor and public-health expert, and included Jane Addams, a close mentor to Abbott. The ASHA applied what it considered “forward-looking scientific approaches” and private investigators to uncover and document pressing social problems such as prostitution (Knepper 2012, 7). Snow also served as chairman of the League of Nation’s Special Body of Experts on the Traffic in Women and Children from 1924 to 1928. He, in turn, was responsible for the appointment of Bascom Johnson, who had served as head of the legal affairs at ASHA and as the director of investigations of the two enquiries. During the First World War, both Snow and Johnson successfully worked with the U.S. Army Commission on Training Camp Activities to control the epidemic of venereal diseases by closing down or moving red-light districts that were near military encampments. Their efforts were related to a nationwide wave of vice commissions in the 1910s, whose investigations led to more repressive laws and policies against women suspected of engaging in prostitution: “Many states established reformatories for women . . . and required medical examinations for venereal diseases prior to marriage” (Lubove 1962, 328). Snow had also served as the vice president of the American Eugenics Society. Eugenicist ideologies of “racial preservation” through forced sterilization and immigration restriction were expressed in the ASHA’s Journal of Social Hygiene. One article begins, “For any country at any given stage of advancement of its arts, and of
exhaustion of its resources, there is an optimum number of inhabitants up to which the country can continue to increase its population without producing an undue pressure upon subsistence. ... A well-ordered community will strive to reach this adjustment. It may do so by encouraging or discouraging emigration, or by raising or lowering the birth-rate” (R. H. Johnson 1919, 223). Another article, titled “Eugenical Sterilization in the United States,” argues that “the relation between the inheritable qualities of our immigrants and the destiny of the American nation is very close. ... Thus, if the American nation desires to upbuild or even to maintain its standard of natural qualities, it must forbid the addition through immigration to our human breeding-stock of persons of a lower natural hereditary constitution than that which constitutes the desired standard” (Laughlin 1920, 530–31).

The significance of monitoring immigration was prominent in the expanded “Questionnaire issued by the special body of experts on the traffic in women and children” on 3 April 1924, which was printed as annex 2 of the 1927 Report. In addition to requesting government statistics on the “number, age, nationality and length of residence of foreign women who are known to be regularly engaged in prostitution, either in licensed houses or elsewhere,” the lengthy, multipart question 5 asks for “any available statistics regarding immigration and emigration for the years 1919–1923,” including the “total number of male and female immigrants classified according to nationality,” and it specifies “foreign women who have been admitted in the last five years ... classified according to age-group (under 18, 18–21, 21–30, and over 30), and according to occupations” (League of Nations 1927, 196).

The determining influence of this distinctly U.S. preoccupation with prostitution, immigration, and racial purity in shaping the 1927 enquiry was largely eclipsed by highlighting the incontrovertible rigor of direct observation of “facts” by trained experts. The inclusion of professional women such as Alma Sundquist of Sweden, a physician who served on the three-member traveling commission, further provided an aura of legitimacy. Even as the authors of the 1927 Report ceremoniously acknowledged “the most cordial response” from all the countries that were investigated, “with the result that the representatives of the Body of Experts were given every facility on carrying out their work and received the active help of officials and other persons concerned” (League of Nations 1927, 5), the authenticity and reliability of these independent “expert” observations were repeatedly upheld. Pointing to how Bascom Johnson’s “legal training and long experience of social studies proved invaluable,” the authors added that the commission was “assisted by a group of highly qualified investigators” (ibid.). The undercover methods used had been refined in the earlier anti-vice campaigns in the United States. Of the mostly U.S. male field operatives Johnson employed, Paul Kinsie, who directed the ASHA’s undercover research program, played an especially key role. In his assessment of Kinsie’s field reports filed in the ASHA archives, Knepper concludes that “it is clear that he was an excellent ethnographer. ... Kinsie focused on activities and relationships that comprised the White slave trade, such as tricks for evading surveillance at the border” (2012, 13). In an article relating a detailed account of how the enquiry came into being, Dame Rachel Crowdy, the head of the Social Section of the League, was particularly laudatory about how the expert commission was “lucky enough to get hold of eight or ten very courageous and very resourceful men and women, and for the last three years those people have been working as part of the underworld” (1927, 157). The League reports conferred both expert confirmation and empirical validation on the traffic in women as a real and actionable international phenomenon.
Rather than herald their innovation and scientific rigor, I would argue that the League reports attest to the shared genealogy and porosity among undercover, state-sanctioned, and academic modes of knowledge production, and to how each served to prop up the factual aura of the others’ truth claims. Instigated, underwritten, and carried out by particularly interested U.S. agents, the “revolutionary” method of employing undercover agents could not be applied in the second investigation in the Far East. As Knepper notes, “Because the traffic in women in Asia involved Asian women, [Johnson] had ‘little use for [a] white investigator’” (2012, 21–22). Instead, the 1932 Report relied on interviews with government officials and testimonies from local voluntary organizations. Thus, the racially discriminating and geopolitically selective origins of anti-trafficking in the imperial age were reinscribed in the shift to “international co-operation” built on “expert” and “on-the-spot” investigations.

More significant than the method of information acquisition, the two reports differed in their composition and organization. The 1932 Report imposed a clear racial demarcation between “Occidental women” and “ Asiatic women.” Indeed, the authors outline two possibilities that had been considered for the report’s organization. The first option, of “dividing it into chapters according to the territories visited,” would have demonstrated “the problem under enquiry in the light of the social and economic conditions, laws and administrative measures of each territory” (League of Nations 1932, 18). However, with such an approach, “the actual stages of international traffic would appear in fragmentary form with no proper link.” In addition, the nation-based organization would produce “a considerable amount of duplication.” The commission ultimately elected the second approach, of dividing the report into “chapters treating the problem according to racial groups of victims,” because “this arrangement, which, like the international traffic itself, disregards political frontiers, would convey to the readers a more living picture of all causes, methods and consequences of traffic, following it through all stages from place of origin to the place of destination” (ibid.).

The first section of the 1932 Report, “The Findings of the Inquiry,” opens with the two racial distinctions clearly denoted in paragraph headings titled “Traffic in Occidental Women in Asia” and, immediately following, “Traffic in Asiatic Women.” Although the authors later note that “the bulk of the traffic with which this report is concerned is traffic in Asiatic women from one country of Asia to another,” they first point out that “there is a certain movement of occidental prostitutes to the Orient, while hardly any oriental women are known to go for purposes of prostitution to the Occident.” The overriding concern with interracial sexual relations, which is categorized as a matter of “international traffic,” is expressed and explained in the further subdivision of “occidental women.”

Within the Occidental victims of traffic in Asiatic countries, the most serious problem and one which is fraught with the danger of further development concerns Russian women of the refugee class in Northern China and Manchuria. It is not in the fully accepted sense of the word a traffic between Occident and Orient, as the victims either are residents of China or come from the Asiatic parts of Russian territory. But even when staged entirely within the borders of China, it clearly bears the stamp of international traffic. (League of Nations 1932, 21)

Note the slippage between interracial and international. Even as the rubric of the
"international" was marshaled to herald a new, racially neutral concern about the traffic in women and to authorize the League with an unprecedented supranational political will, this passage demonstrates a persistent inability to transcend the racialist and racist worldview of empire. The remarks go on to point out how the demand for Occidental women was decreasing in Asia, adding that, "provided efforts to check traffic [were] maintained, there [would be] no need to fear a revival of the conditions of twenty or thirty years [before], when considerable numbers of Occidental prostitutes, beginning with the countries nearer their homes, went farther and farther abroad in the Orient in the various stages of their search for new opportunities to exercise their profession" (ibid.). The assurances against interracial sexual contact is soon reitered: "Traffic in the East is characterized by the fact that prostitutes going to foreign countries do so exclusively in search of clients among their own countrymen abroad" (ibid., 22). The summary ends with a paragraph subtitled "Less Cynicism than in Occident," which notes that even as the "Asiatic prostitutes" had to contend with more deplorable working conditions, "there was a noticeable absence of vulgar appeal to sensuality, such as is often displayed by occidental prostitutes" (ibid.).

The following substantial section, on "Racial Groups of Victims," is further subdivided into these distinguished groups: "Occidental Women (Excepting Russians of the Far East) as Victims of the Traffic to the Orient"; "Russian Women in the Far East as Victims of International Traffic"; "Chinese Victims of International Traffic"; and "Women of Japanese Nationality as Victims of International Traffic." These sections are followed by shorter sections on "Filipino Women," "Annamite Women" (in reference to women from the Union of Indochina), "Siamese Women," "Women of Malay Race," "Indian Women," "Persian Women," "Arab and Other Women of the Near East," and, finally, "African Victims of International Traffic in Asia." In spite of this vast range of geographical locations and ethnic diversity, the 1932 Report expresses the most urgent concern for the plight of the Russian women refugees as truly "unwilling" victims, forced to engage in prostitution and interracial sexual relations with Chinese men.

Despite the questionable methods, these reports were widely read and endorsed, fueling further enactments against and surveillance of women’s cross-border movements. The antitrafficking efforts also fed, with mixed results, into calls for the greater involvement of women in policing and in public patrols. Some women activists publicly objected to how the expanding reach of the protocols and conventions would delimit the mobility of all women (Pilely 2010, 101–2). There have been divergent assessments of the prominence of the traffic in women in the League of Nation's activities. Some scholars see it as an achievement and vindication of the hard-fought efforts of women's groups who sent delegates to Geneva to campaign for a range of issues, including an equal-rights treaty. To be sure, the multimodal work of antitrafficking created an opening for a limited number of women professionals and activists in this newly emergent international framework of advocacy and governance. Fröken Forchhammer addressed the topic in the first speech ever given by a woman to the Assembly of the League. The Social Section of the League, which was charged with addressing the traffic in women and children, was the only section headed by a woman, Dame Rachel Crowdy. The permanent Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children included, in addition to Grace Abbott, Paulina Luisi, a physician from Uruguay, and Princess Bandini of Italy, who also served on the League’s eight-member international committee of experts. In 1922 the secretary general took special note of how the Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children "contained a larger representation of women than any other Committee of the League,
since the question with which it dealt required the fullest co-operation of women.”

Noting the absence of the issue in the first draft of the covenant for the League, from February 1919, Karina Leppanen concludes, “It demonstrates the fact that feminist interests were highly visible in the League and shows how successfully women and feminist organisations lobbied the League from the start” (2007, 527). Stephanie Limoncelli is more measured, and ultimately skeptical. Pointing to the initial resistance from the mostly male leadership, she argues that “officials wanted to ensure coordinated policy for overseeing existing international conventions already signed by member states, including the 1904 and 1910 accords dealing with the white slavery traffic” (2010, 73). Limoncelli concludes, “Bureaucratic logic rather than humanitarian concern seems to have led the League to its anti-trafficking work” (ibid., 73–74). I have proposed a third framing of the League’s work of antitrafficking, one that demonstrates how the coordinated surveillance of women’s sexuality, labor, and migration made international cooperation thinkable, even as this very effort testified to the intractability of racialist and racist divisions that precluded its effective enactment.

Notes

1. Levine also points out that there was some variation in how infected women were treated, including expulsion from areas near military encampments or cutting off their hair to deter public presence: “In other colonies, the means chosen were less dramatic and ritualized, but still focused on women’s mobility: the governing assumption was that knowing women’s whereabouts and having the ability to register, detain, or expel them bodily was desirable” (2003, 39).


3. The 1921 questionnaire included a supplementary section on “Colonies and Dependencies,” which expressed a persistent worry about interracial sexual relations. A parenthetical note in the section pointed out, “Reports have been received that it is the practice in certain Colonies for immigrant white men to have native women and girls procured for them for immoral purposes, and that these women and girls are provided for them by Chiefs or procurers” (League of Nations 1921a, 231).

4. Johnson had previously served as the director of the Sanitary Corps of the national army, and in 1918 published an essay titled “Eliminating Vice from Camp Cities” in the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.

5. This dynamic has extended into contemporary assessments. Citing Judith Walkowitz’s 1980 argument that “white slavery” and ‘child prostitution scandals’ in late nineteenth century Britain ‘had all the symptoms of a cultural paranoia,’” Barbara Metzger counters the charge with the assertion that “investigations by the League of Nations later confirmed the existence of trafficking as a long-standing phenomenon” (2007, 56).

6. Quoted in Pilely 2010, 96. Pilely further points out that “by 1930 women represented six out of the fourteen governmental delegates and four of the six assessors.”