

Josephine Butler:
A Century Long Battle to End International Sex Trafficking
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Over the last eight years, with the passage of the Trafficking Victim's Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA), U.S. citizens have learned about human trafficking. In the process we also learned about parliamentarian William Wilberforce, who through his passion and tenacity led the battle to pass The Slave Trade Act, ending the British slave trade in 1807. A movie has been made about Wilberforce (Amazing Grace), and the most recent reauthorization of the TVPA was named after him (The William Wilberforce Act of 2008).

As we make the links between contemporary forms of slavery and international human trafficking and slavery and trafficking from previous centuries, hopefully we will be introduced to more early heroes. One such person is Josephine Butler, a British reformer who led a twenty year campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts in England and India, worked to abolish commercial sexual exploitation of women and children, and founded the International Abolitionist Federation, an early international anti-slavery organization.

Born on April 13, 1828, she was the daughter of a wealthy landowner and cousin of Earl Grey, the British Prime Minister and early anti-slavery activist. She was a great beauty: Prince Leopold once commented that she was the most beautiful woman in England. With both wealth and beauty, she could have sailed through life in the upper classes. Instead, she married George Butler, an academic, and later a preacher. He had strong abolitionist ties, and she joined him in his causes. They supported the Union in the American Civil War, and worked in the British abolitionist movement.

She was both an ardent Christian and a dedicated feminist. Some would say these are an unlikely combination. Yet today, with groups like Feminists for Life and the Susan B. Anthony Foundation, which believe in the dignity and worth of all human beings, including females, it is easier to understand that the two beliefs are not mutually exclusive. Butler once said that "God and one woman make a majority."

In 1860, after losing a six year old daughter in an accident, Butler threw herself into charity work. She volunteered in the poorest sections of Liverpool, and there first visited the workhouses and met women in prostitution. In 1864, Parliament had just passed the first of several Contagious Diseases Acts, which required mandatory health inspections of all females in prostitution. The law was passed to prevent the spread of venereal disease, particularly among British Army and Royal Navy.

The legislation allowed policeman to arrest a woman in prostitution in any port or army town (later versions of the Act broadened the jurisdiction of the law to all of Britain) and bring her in to have a compulsory check for venereal disease. If the examination revealed symptoms of any sexually transmitted diseases, the woman was placed in a locked hospital until cured. The goal of the legislation was to protect men from infected women, and many abuses of the law occurred, including rough treatment by the examiners, false accusations of prostitution, and city-wide round-ups for mandatory examinations that included many who were not "working women."

Butler was appalled and wondered aloud why only women were required to undergo compulsory examinations. Shortly afterward, she began working to repealing the Contagious Disease Acts of 1864, 67, and 69. For twenty years, she traveled around the country, calling meetings, giving speeches and organizing to educate British citizens about the problem.

She used a technique we have adopted in the current anti-trafficking movement: telling the stories of women subjected to these brutal conditions. She understood that only by making the harm visible would she move people to action. By several accounts, her detailed descriptions of the compulsory checks were gruesome and shocking. She called the inspections “surgical rape,” and urged Christians, women, and rights activists to protest the double-standard in treatment of men and women. In her diary, she wrote that in 1870 when she described the degradation, humiliation, and pain of women suspected, interrogated, inspected, and arrested under the law, Hugh Price Hughes, Superintendent of the West Long Mission, “burst into tears and rushed from the platform.” In 1886 the Contagious Disease Acts were repealed.

In 1885, she began work on another important campaign that foreshadowed the anti-trafficking work we are doing today. A colleague and friend, William B. Stead, editor of the Pall Mall Gazette, and a champion of child welfare reform, began an investigation into children trafficked into prostitution. Stead set out to buy a child for sex. With the help of Josephine Butler and Bramwell Booth of the Salvation Army, Stead was introduced to the part of town where prostitution, pimping, and pandering occurred. He purchased a thirteen-year old named Eliza Armstrong for a total of £5, and wrote about it the next day in the Pall Mall Gazette. It created a firestorm of protest about the sexual exploitation of children. Shades of Nicholas Kristoff who recently purchased two children in Cambodia for \$350 and wrote about it in his column in The New York Times creating a similar (but this time global) firestorm!

The Gazette articles created publicity which Josephine Butler used to campaign for new laws raising the age of consent to sex from 12 to 16. One hundred years later, while the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child now defines a minor as anyone below 18 years of age, in many countries (and some states in the U.S.) the age of consent to sex still remains lower than 18, allowing a loophole in child prostitution laws.

Butler spent her final decades taking the battles international to (at that time) British India and to France, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany and The Netherlands. Her last organizing effort was the founding of the International Abolitionist Federation in 1875. This venerable institution is now almost 135 years old, and still involved today in fighting commercial sexual exploitation of women and children. As we build a new global human rights movement to stop trafficking in persons, it is helpful to look back to Josephine Butler, celebrate her accomplishments, and complete her life’s work to end sex slavery around the world.