Empire, Internationalism, and the Campaign against the Traffic in Women and Children in the 1920s

Abstract
This article assesses the inter-war campaign against trafficking in women and children, with a particular focus on the leading role played by British and British-dominated voluntary associations. This humanitarian campaign was conducted by social relief organizations such as the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) and the International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children (IBSTWC). While organized opposition to trafficking in persons was not new, these groups consciously ‘internationalized’ their advocacy and lobbying efforts in the 1920s and 1930s. Although their work against trafficking in the Straits Settlements, or the prostitution rings operating in the Mediterranean, was driven in part by the desire to protect Britain’s national prestige, their moral impetus and their cooperation with non-British bodies reflected wider international concerns. The article also explores the use of public diplomacy as a new political tool, with a particular focus on the public-private cooperation evident in the League of Nations’ work to combat the trade. Finally, the article advances some conclusions as to why British women’s political organizations in particular were some of the earliest ‘internationalists’, how successful internationalists were in combating transnational social problems, and to what extent inter-war internationalists established a precedent for the subsequent growth of international social relief organizations.

In the late spring of 1929, members of the French social outreach organization les Amies de la jeune fille in Marseilles welcomed back to France a young girl named Andrée Guillet. Guillet had just returned from Egypt, no doubt happy to leave the jail which had been her home for the previous year. She had been convicted of prostitution. As she told Paul Coihen, a French Consular Officer in Cairo, becoming...
a prostitute overseas was not her choice. She had met a man in Nîmes named Sachelli, who ‘made me to understand that he loved me and that his business was at Marseilles. I was convinced of his allegation and consented to leave with him for Marseilles to get married.’ Sachelli asked her to work as a sales lady until they got married, and then to go to Egypt to work there for one of his friends. He promised to follow soon. Guillet refused. He later took her to a bar, where they met two mechanics from a steamer. After drinking, he ‘threatened to shoot me with a revolver should I not accompany the two men to their [ship]’. Guillet was then taken on board, where the mechanics ‘put me in one of the big pipes of the steamer, where I remained two days without seeing anyone nor had any food. I was afraid to ask for help in case they assault me.’ She was then taken to a house for a month until Sachelli returned, took her to Cairo, and forced her into prostitution. After working for several months, she was arrested and sentenced by the French Consular Court.\(^1\)

The vigilance of officials in Andrée’s case was in part due to the efforts of a newly influential type of organization in the 1920s—international humanitarian organizations, many of which had their origins in British imperial interest groups. The reports of women like Cicely McCall, of the Egyptian bureau of the International Bureau for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children (IBSTWC), highlighted the abysmal nature of the trade. McCall described the conditions in Cairo where young women like Guillet worked:

> [e]ven nowadays, tourists are sometimes taken round the segregated quarter by their obliging dragomen to see the signs. Yet few people realise the full horror of the segregated quarter and particularly the native quarter. The street...is densely crowded...where brothels consist of hovels opening on to the street like shops, with a dirty pink cotton curtain across the opening, and a bed of the same enticing colour behind... A prostitute knows nothing of the eight hour day. She works every day of the month, and all day even though perhaps suffering from continual hæmorrhage.\(^2\)

Organizations such as *les Amies de la jeune fille* and the IBSTWC were not new. Yet before the war such organizations acted as domestic pressure groups, their interests and influence confined to enacting

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change at home. After the war they were transformed into what we would now term international non-governmental organizations, with a new degree of autonomy. This transformation was the result of two factors: the emergence of internationalism as a foreign policy ideal, and the increased attention paid by British imperialists to humanitarianism. This article assesses how these two developments coalesced in the international movement against the traffic in women and children.

The inter-war period sits uneasily in British imperial historiography, variously a period of primacy, plateau or decline. Scholars who focus on Britain’s ‘hard’ or material power see the beginning of the end, the empire suffering from ‘the paradox of power’. It was overextended, hard-pressed to put out increasingly frequent colonial brushfires, starved of funds by a parsimonious Treasury, and losing ground to newly powerful international rivals on the continent, across the Atlantic, and in Asia. Others argue that the British empire remained a world power after the First World War. For Cain and Hopkins, colonial administrators’ preference for social and political stability over economic development, and the dominions’ lingering ‘economic dependency’, ensured continued imperial unity, while Britain’s favourable balance of trade and investment helped her stave off foreign rivals. John Ferris and Gordon Martel present a ‘Canadian Conjecture’, arguing that national prestige is ultimately more important in exercising power than a nation’s material capacity, and that Britain drew on a deep reserve of the former to remain a world power after 1919. Yet capacity and influence need not be seen as mutually exclusive. Indeed, John Gallagher’s conclusion that the inter-war empire was in a state of flux still seems closest to the mark. It could not withstand another war (as the Second World War soon proved), an expanded electorate placed ever greater demands on the government,


and much of the empire was only nominally under British control. Yet, the empire had expanded to its greatest territorial point, Britain faced no great rivals (at least not until the 1930s), and the political parties’ mutual desires to police internal party dissent meant domestic politics veered decidedly to the centre in the 1920s.6

Despite their differences, these varying interpretations of Britain’s inter-war imperial stature see international and imperial relations as the exclusive terrain of nation-states or colonial governments, and concentrate on measurable attributes of state-centred power. The rise of what we might term ‘the new internationalism’, however, muddied these waters, introducing new international bodies and non-governmental organizations into international relations, and concomitantly making domestic affairs a new prerogative of international action. The 1920s proved a rare decade of ‘unstable equilibrium’7 where the empire could function largely free of external influences, and also give space to experimentation. A further reason, then, why this was a period of flux is that Britain was learning how to adapt to, exploit, and defend itself from the dictates of internationalism, both in new institutional arenas and in relation to an idea whose moral authority could have a strong effect on public opinion.

Internationalism, of course, predated the First World War. Its modern history can be traced to Kant’s On Perpetual Peace (1795), and the late nineteenth century witnessed the creation of many ‘international’ bodies, notably the International Telegraph Union, the Red Cross, and the International Postal Union.8 Yet these were largely European bodies, and their progress was checked by the more powerful forces of nationalism. The First World War, however, dealt nationalism a decisive, if temporary, blow, and ideas of internationalism grew anew in the 1920s. The war created a greater consciousness of social, political and economic problems which transcended borders, and efforts in Britain to confront these problems thus took on an international dimension, sometimes overlapping and sometimes extending beyond the geographic and mental borders of empire.


8 See Akira Iriye, Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World (Berkeley, 2002), 11–16.
a member of the League of Nations International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (itself a representative creature of the age), spoke of an *élan vital*, the desire to live better. He stressed ‘becoming’ over ‘being’, and his philosophy of ‘creative evolution’ influenced many internationalists.\(^9\) While the war had seemingly confirmed that world politics was trapped in ‘an amoral sequence of force and violence’,\(^10\) internationalists such as Leonard Woolf argued that moral internationalism, drawn in part on the co-operative base of the British empire, offered a way out.\(^11\) This nascent ‘international community’ may have been born premature, a conclusion seemingly confirmed by its temporary eclipse in the 1930s, yet it was strong enough to re-emerge as part of the post-1945 international settlement.

One arena where internationalization took hold in the 1920s was social relief. The most expansive social relief campaign of the era was that directed against the traffic in women and children, and led by organizations such as the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) and the IBSTWC. While their membership was largely British, these groups worked with foreign organizations, and understood that international solutions were the only means to combat the organized prostitution trade. Thus, while their work against trafficking was driven in part by the desire to protect Britain’s national prestige, their moral impetus and their cooperation with non-British bodies both reflected wider, international concerns. This campaign reflected a broader internationalization of Britain’s imperial interests in the 1920s.

The Foreign Office expanded its role in overseeing the empire’s relations with other powers, and also administered Britain’s relations with the League of Nations. Both roles brought it into greater conflict with its junior cousin, the Colonial Office, responsible for the colonies’ internal affairs. Nine other government bodies also had claims on international and imperial affairs.\(^12\) This sense of jurisdictional confusion and competition paradoxically both encouraged conservative

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\(^{9}\) George Walley, ‘Henri Bergson’, *Architects of Modern Thoughts* (Toronto, 1959), 36, 42.


\(^{12}\) In addition to the Foreign Office and Colonial Office, the respective offices were the Admiralty, the Air Ministry, the Board of Trade, the Committee of Imperial Defence, the Dominions Office (after 1925), the India Office, the Prime Minister’s Office, the Treasury, and the War Office. Clayton, *British Empire*, 4.
official policy decisions and opened up space for advocates and ideas of internationalism.

The outwardly coherent concept of ‘internationalism’ meant different things to different groups—both moderate British liberals and French syndicalists, after all, claimed the term. In Britain, internationalism was an indirect consequence of Lloyd George’s tumultuous Liberal leadership, which created deep fissures in the party. Some Liberals, such as Norman Angell, expressed a renewed adherence to Cobdenite free trade as a buttress against war. Many, though, rejected this as wilfully ignoring the lessons of the First World War, and instead turned to ‘positions above politics’, including internationalism. The Liberal elite saw themselves as the intellectual leaders of this nascent international movement: ‘they were going to be the enlightened aristocratic teachers who set the new mass democracy on the right course in foreign policy before they depart the stage of history’.13 Internationalism appealed to Liberals because it accorded with their politics of principle, setting them apart from what they saw as the Conservatives’ reactionary nationalism and Labour’s divisive socialism. Liberal intellectuals like Gilbert Murray favoured an international government based on the rule of law and a common morality. These new Liberals, David Long writes, ‘conceived of an international government, of which the League of Nations was to be the precursor, as a fluid set of organizations aimed at facilitating and directing cooperation for the improvement of human welfare and liberty’. They evinced a fervent belief in progress, a Fabian preference for gradual reform, and a sense that individual liberty was more important than social structures.14 They thus adopted a ‘functional’ approach to international change, and as such found common cause with internationalists further to the left. The strongest left internationalists were the Fabians and the Labour Party’s Advisory Committee on International Questions. Their colonial interests lay primarily in Africa, where Lugard’s dual mandate seemed to provide an ideal means for international development and, through the economic benefits that would accrue to the British working class, the attenuation of class barriers at home.15

The introduction of liberal internationalism into the inter-war imperial discourse can be seen as something of an empty vessel, propping open the door between the promise of self-rule and the continued practice of imperial dominance. Even the 1929 Colonial Development Act was motivated more by a desire to alleviate unemployment in Britain than to help grow colonial economies. Nonetheless, if the British backed into a more ethical imperialism, the appearance of a moral, critical, modern humanitarianism cannot be dismissed out of hand. While measures such as the extension of citizenship rights to Indians in Kenya in Lord Passfield’s White Paper (1929) can be seen as self-serving measures to protect the privileged position of white settlers, the broadly-based campaigns against slavery, opium and the traffic in women and children suggest a moral internationalism that transcended self-interested imperialism. The anti-opium campaign, for instance, in fact threatened the financial basis of Britain’s ‘narco-imperialism’ in South-East Asia. Whether liberal and left internationalists’ interests in promoting colonial development were paternalistic or the result of romanticizing indigenous communities, the end result was an intersection of imperialism and internationalism which opened up new possibilities for combating world social and political problems.

The key element of inter-war internationalism’s infrastructure was the League of Nations. The League idea was particularly attractive to imperialists, who believed it embodied what they saw as the British empire’s spirit of promoting peace through amity. In a speech at the University of Toronto in 1921, Newton Rowell, the Canadian politician and delegate to the League, argued that the world’s most pressing problem was how to replace war as a means of solving disputes, and how to supplement the state-system with international cooperation. He pointed to the empire as an ideal prototype, for ‘its constitution is sufficiently flexible to permit of the greatest freedom of action on the part of its constituent members and also the necessary cooperation in all vital matters of common concern’. The League was designed as a permanent sitting conference of nations. It would promote international interdependence through the idea of conventionality,

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18 ‘Note of a Meeting held in the Secretary of state’s Room on Tuesday, 7th of October, at 3 p.m.’, Passfield Papers, London School of Economics, Vol. 1, File B, 53.
with public opinion and economic sanctions its main enforcement tools. While the League proved a flawed mechanism for ensuring collective security, its social and humanitarian work was more successful. Part XIII of the Treaty of Versailles affirmed that ‘social unrest in any one country is a fruitful source of discord in all’. League bodies like the Permanent Mandates Commission, the Advisory Committee on Traffic in Women and Children, the High Commission for Refugees, and the League-affiliated but independent International Labour Organization made progress on social and economic problems where national governments had not. If this ‘saintly side’ of the League sometimes proved wanting—the Permanent Mandates Commission, for instance, was often paralyzed by bickering—these bodies did monitor the actions of national governments and provided universal norms against which the latter could be measured. It was in part this sense of moral authority that helped ‘internationalize’ imperialism in the 1920s, and that spurred humanitarian groups like the AMSH and the IBSTWC into action.

The ‘internationalization’ of imperialism in the 1920s made possible a second development, namely the increased influence of women in imperial politics. Though organizations like the AMSH included both men and women, they evinced a decidedly feminist vision. As Barbara Bush argues, the 1920s witnessed a ‘feminization’ of empire, seen especially in a turn to humanitarian concerns and the promotion of domesticity as an imperial virtue. As Bush and Philippa Levine have both demonstrated, ‘service imperialism’ had deep historical roots. The First World War challenged the underlying masculine ethos of imperial politics.

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empire, however, and the cultural and gendered doubts which emerged created space for advocates of international cooperation. The entry of more women into the international political sphere meant greater attention was given to transnational social and political problems like the traffic in women and children, as well as the plight of displaced persons, the international drug trade and other humanitarian causes. Much work aimed at alleviating these problems in the 1920s followed the imperial contours of Levine’s anti-Contagious Diseases Acts advocates. Susan Pedersen, writing on the inter-war campaign against the practice of mui tsai in Hong Kong (the sale of young girls into domestic service, sometimes as a cover for procuring them as prostitutes), identifies this period as ‘the maternalist moment’ in imperial history; Bush speaks of a ‘humanitarian discourse’. These appropriate sobriquets help explain the post-war shift towards a more constructive imperialism, as women’s organizations brought their self-perceived moral capabilities and insight and experience in domestic aid and outreach work into their new international concern. The intersection of discourses of feminized humanitarian imperialism and internationalism is best shown in the parallel efforts of the AMSH and the League’s Advisory Committee on Traffic in Women and Children, to which we now turn.

The AMSH was formed in 1870 by Josephine Butler to combat the Contagious Diseases Acts. In 1915 it absorbed the Ladies National Association and the British branch of the British, Continental and General Federation for the Abolition of Government Regulation of Prostitution. Butler’s abolitionist view on state regulation of prostitution remained a lasting influence. So too did her evangelicalism: ‘[t]he most degraded, the most criminal, of men and women are yet our brethren, and of none of them do we dare to say that they are beyond redemption, and incapable of a spiritual resurrection’. In the 1920s, the AMSH’s professed goals were to raise the moral standard of sexual relations between men and women, and ultimately the abolition of prostitution. The AMSH had a minimum one-third membership requirement of each sex, acknowledging the need to attract men of

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political influence and to avoid being unfairly depicted as ‘a women’s organization’ in the press. It worked closely with other vigilance and women’s organizations, with representatives on the National Committee of the National Vigilance Association (with whom the AMSH had a competitive rivalry), the National Council of Women and the International Council of Women. In turn, local branches of groups such as the Women Citizens’ associations and national groups like the Mothers’ Union sent representatives to the AMSH.

The AMSH conducted much purely domestic work. Its 1920 ‘Report into Sexual Morality’, an initiative that attracted twenty-one other British organizations, warned of the multitude of moral dangers faced by Britons, especially the young, and reflected the organization’s lingering values of Victorian propriety. Morality organizations such as the AMSH and the National Vigilance Association reflected contemporaries’ moral uncertainty, created to a great degree by shifting gender and sexual norms. Issues as mundane as mixed sunbathing or women’s swimming fashions could prompt a hyperbolic response. On one particularly hot summer day in 1927, Londoner Harold Vincent found himself charged with an indecent offence for lying on his coat in Hyde Park wearing only a pair of shorts. The magistrate rejected Vincent’s sardonic plea that ultra-violet rays were good for the skin, intoning that ‘to expose the upper part of your body—the torso—is indecent’. He spoke for the majority public view. The Daily News wrote that ‘[n]obody pretends that it is wicked to lie about in Hyde Park with nothing on but a pair of shorts: but nobody can pretend it is necessary’, while the Daily Express re-affirmed ‘mixed sea bathing, in which a garment was worn which covered the greater part of the body in order that the average English susceptibilities should not be offended’.

When ‘leg-mania’ (women wearing shorter swimming suits) swept southern England in 1928, protests led to police surveillance at public swimming sites.

If some found such reactions bemusing—Reynolds News: ‘did somebody say that the policeman’s lot was not a happy one?’—many more were scandalized, and drew on pre-war moral standards for solace. Vigilance societies found their constituencies in this latter group. An editorial in the Vigilance Record, the National Vigilance Association’s organ, intoned

[t]here is little doubt that a great detail of the undesirable features of modern life can be directly traced to the fact that local public opinion no longer exercises a restraining influence on conduct.

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30 Morning Advertiser, 6 August 1927; Daily News, 13 August 1927; Daily Express, 13 August 1927.
Gossip could be vilely scandalous and cruel, but in general it did operate for good.31

This staunch moral seriousness was particularly in evidence concerning issues of sex and, in particular, prostitution. Alison Neilens, the AMSH’s forceful secretary, defined prostitution as ‘a vice not a crime—a moral offence not a legal one’.32 The AMSH believed prostitution was best opposed through public education. It lobbied both the public and government through its house periodical The Shield, by sitting on public commissions, and through informal letter-writing and personal persuasion. Other groups, notably the National Vigilance Association, also conducted outreach efforts at railway stations and ports, rescuing girls from potential traffickers. Opponents criticized the ‘purely suppressive character’ of this work. One critic wrote to the National Vigilance Association that,

your society is dominated by those who think sex foul and the human body vile...you may ‘save’ prostitutes but at the price of robbing marriage of much of its meaning for those unfortunates who come under your influence and who are led thereby to look upon sex as, at best, a necessary evil.33

These sentiments reflected the social unease and confusion concerning issues of public morality, and help explain why vigilance organizations employed both Victorian methods of ‘rescue work’ and the emerging political tools of mass democratic persuasion. Additionally, while the AMSH increasingly shifted its attention to the problem of ‘demand’ by the later 1920s, identifying men’s view of prostitutes as commodities as the main problem and endeavouring to cut demand through public education and shame, in the 1920s it still focused on the ‘supply’ side, and thus most of its efforts went to preventing women from entering the trade in the first place. The combination of moral seriousness, a principled and inflexible position on issues of public morality and a focus on supply-side solutions which marked the AMSH’s domestic work also drove the group’s international efforts. The AMSH was represented on several international vigilance organizations, most notably the IBSTWC, of which it was the British branch. It was through the IBSTWC that the AMSH was able to lobby other national governments and the League.

31 Reynolds News, 22 July 1928; Vigilance Record, Records of the National Vigilance Association [hereafter NVA], Women’s Library, London Metropolitan University, March 1930, S. 129.
33 Alan B. Ward to NVA, 30 July 1930. NVA 4/NVA Box 195 S.128
Concern over the traffic in women and children was not new. What had previously been hyperbolically termed the ‘white slave trade’ was a perennial concern of the late Victorian period, especially amongst the press and social reformers. W. T. Stead’s ‘The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’, which appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, is only the most well-known (and controversial) example. While modern scholars see the sexual abuse of minors as the central aspect of the history of youth prostitution, contemporaries found discussions of childhood sexuality too uncomfortable to discuss, and instead focused their attention on the means by which young women entered the trade. Panics over the ‘white slave trade’ were also proxies for parochial fears of foreigners or colonial ‘others’. Yet the public discourse on prostitution remained narrowly domestic, centred on a contestation of the Contagious Diseases Acts and female sexual agency in British society. It was not until the turn of the century that the international nature of the traffic in women and children was fully appreciated, and that international action commenced. Philanthropists such as the publisher Alfred Dyer and the banker George Gillet rescued British girls taken into prostitution in Belgium, and the National Vigilance Association, which had lobbied for British legislation to contain provisions for trafficking committed in foreign countries, formed the International Association for the Suppression of the White Slave trade in 1899. Its leader, the reformer William Alexander Coot, lobbied continental governments for support, and in 1904 twelve European states signed the International Treaty for the Suppression of the White Slave Trade. Coote gained support from continental groups like France’s *les Amies de la jeune fille*, itself founded in 1877 to help keep young girls out of prostitution. The International Association had 13,000 women workers in forty-seven countries by 1908.

Like many international organizations, the Association suspended operations during the First World War, reforming in 1919 as

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the IBSTWC. By 1922 it had twenty-one members. The IBSTWC recognized the trade as both a national and international issue, and lobbied for a more comprehensive international treaty to fight the trade. Its lobbying led directly to Article 23 (c) of the Versailles Treaty, which gave the League jurisdiction over the trade. Lingering war interests postponed immediate action—one delegate warned an IBSTWC meeting against ‘any action being taken by the International Bureau which might be hurtful to the feelings of our Allies, who...should be our first consideration’. By 1921, however, when international tension had dissipated, at least in the West, the League convened its initial conference on international prostitution. It produced the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children (1921), with thirty-three signatories. Amongst its clauses was the creation of a League Advisory Committee on Traffic in Women and Children, tasked with gathering data on the trade, still seen by many as ‘fantastical legend’.

The Advisory Committee was composed of national delegates, of whom two of the initial ten were women. National governments sent annual reports on the nature of the trade in their countries to the Advisory Committee, which in turn worked closely with international voluntary organizations like the IBSTWC, the Federation of National Unions for the Protection of Girls, and the International Catholic Association for the Protection of Girls. The key figure in fostering this unofficial correspondence between the League and voluntary organizations was Dame Rachel Crowdy. Crowdy replaced Katherine Furse as director of the continental branch of the British Voluntary Aid Detachment in 1915, and was made DBE in 1919. She became head of the League’s Social Questions and Opium Trafficking Section that same year, and used her position to draw domestic reform agencies into international politics. Crowdy regularly provided the IBSTWC with League documents relating to the trafficking issue, which the latter agreed not to use until they were published. The League Secretariat corresponded with the IBSTWC for assistance in setting the agenda for

By 1922, the following nations were members of the IBSTWC: Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the United States. Russia, Turkey, South Africa and Portugal did not immediately reform after the war.


the League Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children. The IBSTWC in turn solicited ideas and topics of importance from its national societies, which themselves drew on any local or provincial grassroots bodies. As such, a local-global political nexus developed, with voluntary associations operating as embryonic epistemic communities. This close working relationship reveals that each side used the other to develop a common goal. National voluntary organizations thus assumed a greater international imperative during these years. As H.M.L.H. Sark, president of the IBSTWC in the early 1950s, later wrote, ‘the countries with a long-standing tradition in protective work must undertake the education of public opinion in those countries…where state regulation of prostitution still prevails’.44

Despite the initial enthusiasm for the 1921 Convention, only fourteen states had ratified it by 1923.45 Voluntary associations pressured the League Advisory Committee to incorporate more countries, and to expand its activities. Five voluntary associations had assessors on the Committee: the IBSTWC (Annie Baker from the National Vigilance Association), International Women’s Organizations, l’Association catholique international des oeuvres de protection de la jeune fille, la Fédération des unions nationales des amies de la jeune fille, and the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women.46 While the 1921 Convention contained provisions for forced prostitution, it did not protect adults of either sex from being procured as prostitutes if they consented and stayed in the country, nor did it make keeping a brothel an offence. Rectifying these lacunae was the main concern of humanitarian groups in the 1920s. The IBSTWC continued to lobby Convention signatories to pass legislation making trafficking a crime and to protect children. Concerning the latter, it held as a model the British Child Employment Act (1913), which contained health, supervision and safe return provisions for children under sixteen travelling abroad, and prohibited children under fourteen from going abroad to work.47

A particular concern for the League in the early 1920s was the means by which young girls were induced into prostitution. As the Advisory

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45 Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Cuba, Great Britain, Greece, India, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Roumania, Siam and South Africa.
46 Traffic in Women and Children, Report of the Fifth Committee to the Assembly [of League], 1923. A.75.1923.IV
47 League of Nations, Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children, Minutes of the First Session, 28 June–1 July 1922, Annex 8, 43-44. C.445.M.265.1922.IV. Margaret Bondfield, parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Labour in the Labour Party’s first government, spearheaded similar legislation in 1924 which banned children from orphanages or foster care from emigrating abroad if they were under the school leaving age of fourteen.
Committee reported in 1922, ‘it is not an uncommon practice for women to take theatrical engagements abroad under very unsatisfactory contracts with the result that they are often left stranded abroad, and are either encouraged to take up or drift into a life of immorality’. 48 Alison Baker, the National Vigilance Association’s secretary, lobbied Crowdy and Sir Eric Drummond, the League’s first president, to appoint a League body to combat the traffic in women and children. Baker also worked closely with the British Home Office to coordinate the technical side of Britain’s anti-trafficking work at the League, reflecting voluntary organizations’ dual roles as domestic and international actors. Nonetheless, a division still existed between these two forums, and international actors in particular were concerned with maintaining it—Drummond, for instance, declined an offer of membership in the National Vigilance Association to avoid a perception of national bias. 49

The campaign against trafficking assumed additional urgency because of the war experience itself. The combatant nations either ignored or actively encouraged soldiers’ use of prostitutes based on a belief that such behaviour was good for ‘morale’. Officials’ main concern was soldiers’ health, and thus the state took a renewed interest in examining prostitutes’ sexual health. 50 This concern for combating venereal diseases continued after the war, and vigilance organizations responded with a campaign to prevent the renewal or advocate the banning of compulsory examination. This debate between what became known as ‘regulationists’ and ‘abolitionists’ characterized both the imperial and international campaign against forced prostitution in the 1920s. The nature of this conflict, and its implications for the internationalization of imperialism, are revealed through two separate but interconnected developments, both of which spanned much of the decade: the AMSH-led campaign against the restoration of state-regulated prostitution in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States, and the League Advisory Committee’s 1927 fact-finding report on the traffic in women and children.

Despite the long campaign against state-regulated prostitution in the British empire before the First World War, some sanctioned brothels


remained by the early 1920s. These were mainly in naval outposts, such as Gibraltar, Malta, Columbo and Hong Kong, and in South-East Asia. 51

As Crowdy sardonically noted, ‘[w]omen are rushed like medical stores to the scene of a disaster when fleets come into port’. 52 Unsurprisingly, the rates of venereal disease amongst servicemen in these jurisdictions were comparatively high: 248/1000 in the China stations (including Hong Kong and Singapore), compared with 156/1000 at the Africa stations and 65/1000 at the Home stations. 53 The authorities in these jurisdictions either licensed brothels, as in Columbo, or tacitly allowed them, as in Hong Kong. It was in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, though, and particularly Singapore, where support for state-sanctioned prostitution remained strongest, despite the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts there in 1894. 54

The three Straits Settlements and the nine protected Malay provinces which made up the Federated Malay States, though technically separate jurisdictions, shared a high commissioner—Sir Laurence Guillemard from 1919 to 1927. Upon taking office, Guillemard declared the Federated Malay States ‘a country in arrears’, 55 and made improving what he saw as deficient health services one of his priorities. The prostitution situation was exacerbated by the region’s porous borders. Weak anti-trafficking provisions in China in particular meant it was a source for many of the women trafficked in the region, particularly through Siam. 56 Siam had signed the 1921 Treaty on Traffic in Women and Children, but the country’s immigration laws were weak. Its local administration was also inefficient, especially along the northern border with China, where British subjects often had to rely on the intervention of His Majesty’s Legation to solve disputes. 57 As the Protector of Chinese in the northern Malayan province of Keda warned in a memorandum to the Colonial Office, unless the British improved border controls in Hong Kong and the Siamese more closely examined passenger boats arriving in Bangkok, Siam would become ‘a training ground for women kidnapped in China and ultimately destined to be

53 Neilens to Ms Lush, 29 November 1927. AMSH 3/AMS/5/14 (Malaya 1924–).
56 C.W. Beckwith to Attorney General, Hong Kong, Colonial Office circular, 1 January 1921, The National Archives: Public Record Office [hereafter TNA: PRO] CO 323/1070/3.
brought to Malaya for prostitution’. He cited testimony from one Chinese girl who was taken by steamer from Hong Kong to Bangkok, along with forty-seven other girls, before being smuggled into the Federated Malay States:

we [the girls] sat down in the hold in the dark among the bags of coal and escaped notice. An officer came round and prodded the bags but we were not detected. When the ship put out to sea the travelling agents went up on deck... we sat there in the dark all day... On arrival at Bangkok we were all taken to To Shang lodging house... Next day we were all taken to a Siamese official. He could not speak Chinese but had a Chinese clerk. He asked me a few questions about where I came from. Then I was passed.

The girl was then taken into prostitution for two years.58 This case reveals the ease with which women were moved throughout the region due to poor bureaucratic oversight. The problem was exacerbated by a lack of reliable information about trafficking in the region.

In the Federated Malay States themselves, the government acted only when prostitution became too public. While licensed houses were tolerated, the courts intervened when operators used public spaces, such as lemonade stands, as fronts for their business.59 The post-war economic slump, in conjunction with the Japanese ban on karayuki-san, the importation of Japanese prostitutes for overseas Japanese to patronize, led to an increase in Malay, Eurasian and especially Chinese women becoming illegal prostitutes. The latter sometimes came illegally from China via Hong Kong.

The population was also anxious due to fears of a rise in the ‘secret disease’, venereal diseases, with wildly exaggerated claims circulating that up to 40 per cent of the European population was infected. In response, the Straits Settlements Society was formed in March 1923 to lobby for the return of state regulation. It argued that the Straits Settlements had ‘special circumstances’ which should exempt it from the imperial prohibition of the Contagious Diseases Acts: it had a high proportion of male citizens, mainly due to the presence of naval bases; it had a high influx of Chinese settlers who were seen to be ‘morally lax’; and its population was heterogeneous.60 The Society pointed to the large number of Chinese girls resident in the Po Leung Kuk House in Singapore (the Chinese Protectorate-run home for girls rescued from the streets)—130 in 1924—as evidence that the trade

59 Malaya Tribune, 19 August 1927.
60 Straits Times, 18 December 1923; Straits Times, 18 October 1923.
was getting worse without state influence. Guillemard responded to the Society’s claims by appointing a committee of five medical experts, who duly recommended the reintroduction of registration and compulsory exams. An Ordinance containing these measures was forwarded to the Colonial Office in 1924 for approval.

These actions occasioned opposition in both the colonies and Britain. The Bishop of Singapore, the Right Reverend Charles James Ferguson-Davie, was the staunchest local opponent of regulation, viewing it as a tacit recognition of vice. The Bishop’s wife even visited the IBSTWC’s office in London to solicit help in swaying public opinion in the capital to her husband’s cause. Other religious leaders concurred, the Reverend W. E. Horlery stating that ‘[w]ith such places [brothels] in the most prominent parts of our town and villages, the youth of Malaya stands very little chance of living a clean life, in spite of all the moral and sex education we can give them in our schools’. The Malaysian Saturday Post agreed, arguing that regulation had not worked elsewhere in the British empire, and that to adopt it would make the Straits Settlements an outrider. Yet much of the local press supported the reintroduction of regulation. The Straits Times attacked the Bishop’s position, intoning that

He [the Bishop] must not set himself above men of real medical knowledge and experience who are in daily and far closer contact with the people exposed to danger than he is. We care little for the suffering that disease may bring upon the moral but we do care for innocent women and children doomed to lives of agony by the vice and folly of others.

This recourse to the technical expert illustrates the increased role of the specialist in imperial affairs in the 1920s, and the privileging of specialist knowledge.

The AMSH opposed regulation in all of its forms, seeing it as licensed immorality, and an affront to the well-being of the women who became prostitutes. It saw its role as a voice to change public opinion through moral leadership. Neilens reminded members that ‘we do not deny that perhaps the majority of Indians and Chinese are indifferent to, and some may even approve, the present conditions but that was equally true of the people of this country when the Contagious Diseases Acts were fought here too’. Instead, the AMSH favoured public moral

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64 Malaysian Saturday Post, 19 March 1924.
65 Straits Times, 21 January 1924.
education campaigns and the introduction of state-run voluntary medical facilities where prostitutes could seek medical attention without the threat of prosecution or other sanctions. It lobbied its supporters in Parliament, including feminists such as Lady Astor, and the Colonial Office to disallow Guillemard’s proposed Ordinance.67 It also supplied its allies in Singapore, such as the Bishop, with literature, information on abolitionist measures adopted in other colonies, and moral support. The problem in South-East Asia, Neilens believed, was that ‘out in these Eastern Crown Colonies the British official population is frequently very reactionary’.68 The AMSH was joined in its campaign by numerous local voluntary associations in Britain, including the Manchester and Blackburn Diocesan Association for Preventive and Rescue Work, the Bristol Women’s Aid Association, district branches of the National Council of Women, and the Association of Assistant Mistresses in Secondary Schools.69

The campaign achieved some success by 1926, pressuring Guillemard to close a loophole in the Federated Malay States Women and Girls Protection Enactment (1914). While brothel keepers would face a fine if they kept any woman with a venereal disease (the point was to compel keepers to send girls for examination), the prostitutes could not be forced to undergo the test, and thus the law could not be administered. Guillemard recommended that his government be given powers to compel tests,70 a position to which the Foreign Office was receptive due to the ‘recent fuss in FMS [the controversy over state regulation]’71. The government, however, was lobbied on this question by the AMSH’s domestic rival, the British Social Hygiene Council (BSHC), a meta-organization composed of groups in favour of ‘social purity’. Its Secretary-General, Sybil Neville Rolfe, protested that Guillemard’s proposed reforms were not vetted by her society, and argued that ‘there should be some machinery which would enable all proposals or legislation [on trafficking] to be carefully scrutinised by experts before they are sanctioned by HMG’.72

Unlike the AMSH, the BSHC favoured a policy of gradual reform, believing that banning prostitution immediately would throw vulnerable women onto the streets. Thus, though it disapproved of the

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68 Neilens to Mrs Nightengale, 19 December 1927. AMSH 3/AMS/5/14 (Malaya 1924–)
69 Manchester Guardian, 1 February 1928.
70 L.M. Guillemard to Amery, 6 August 1926. TNA: PRO CO 273/539/5.
71 Memorandum, 13 May 1927 (dated 7 July 1927). TNA: PRO CO 273/539/5.
72 Sybil Neville-Rolfe to Under Secretary of State, Colonial Office, 8 November 1927. TNA: PRO CO 273/539/5.
Ordinance’s draconian nature, the BSHC sought to water it down rather than overturn it. Rolfe was a ‘eugenic feminist’ who believed that social hygiene, ‘the application of the biological sciences to the social problems arising out of man’s relationship with man’, was a central component of efforts to improve ‘national efficiency’. She applied these beliefs to women’s health issues, co-founding the Eugenics Society in 1906, and the National Council for Combating Venereal Disease in 1914. The latter changed its name to the BSHC in 1926, and the re-christened organization first applied its precepts to the empire through the Straits Settlements controversy. The BSHC commissioned its own study of conditions in the Straits Settlements by Professor Bostock Hill, a leading proponent of using female ‘health visitors’ to counsel poor and ill women at home and encourage them to adopt better sanitary conditions. Hill brought this reforming spirit with him to the Straits, gathering evidence on the conditions in which prostitutes lived, and the colony’s moral climate. He concluded that Chinese women comprised the majority of women working in the trade, and that education material should thus be in Chinese to reach these women. Hill believed the situation was improving, with brothels no longer advertising with bright lights, and the population receptive to reform.

The BSHC relied heavily on Hill’s reportage in preparing its own report. Its advisory committee reflected both a liberal preference for laissez-faire and the belief that relieving the prostitution problem in Singapore was an issue which impacted the national interest: ‘from a public health point of view the principle of state control of prostitution is fundamentally unsound. Prostitution is essentially unhygienic and no form of control can make it hygienic.’ The committee recommended free treatment for prostitutes, applying the law against keeping brothels to women as well as men, closing the segregated area in Singapore, outlawing bright outdoor lights, launching a public education campaign, and compelling the Federated Malay States to submit in its Annual Report its progress in outlawing the trade. All this must happen in advance of building a naval base at Singapore, the committee concluded, whereupon the prostitution problem might get worse.

75 ‘Report to the BSHC on Visit of Professor Bostock Hill to the Straits Settlements, Federated Malay States and Ceylon, October 1926’, 2-3, 5, 9 in Rolfe to Leo Amery, Secretary of State, Colonial Office, 24 May 1927. TNA: PRO CO 273/539/5.
The BSHC’s final report, submitted to the Colonial Office, recommended that licensed brothels be abolished as soon as possible, and that compulsory examination be banned.77

The 1925 Straits Settlements Ordinance proposing a return of registration and other Contagious Diseases Acts provisions was subsequently submitted to the Colonial Office’s Advisory Committee on Social Hygiene, where Hill also gave evidence. The Advisory Committee rejected the Ordinance, instead suggesting that social conditions be improved, preventative medicine provided, brothels suppressed, and added powers be given to the Chinese Protectorate to protect Chinese girls lured into the trade. Ten thousand copies each of Social Hygiene Information No. 1, an education pamphlet on venereal disease, were printed in Chinese, Tamil, and Malay and distributed in the Straits Settlements. For its part, the AMSH decided to support the Colonial Office Advisory Committee’s Report (Cmd 2501) because it recommended outlawing licensed brothels.78 With the Colonial Secretary endorsing the BSHC’s report, Guillemard was forced to relent, withdrawing the Ordinance and accepting the new provisions. Adapting to the Colonial Office’s directive, he also passed a 1927 Ordinance which authorized a stiffer sentence for reopening a brothel.79

The AMSH continued to monitor the situation after 1927. It disseminated literature both in Britain and Singapore on abolitionist efforts in other countries with the purpose of shaming the government into following broader international practices, publicized the names of brothels which remained open, and lobbied for even stricter legislation. The AMSH also joined with several other local British voluntary organizations to protest publicly against a Federated Malay States amendment to make yearly tests for prostitutes mandatory.80 This pressure helped lead to the 1930 Women and Girls’ Protection Ordinance, which overturned the mandatory test provisions, and made it illegal to keep a brothel or a woman for sexual purposes. The end of regulation in the Straits Settlements in 1930 can thus be seen as a triumph for the AMSH.81 The Straits Settlements campaign shows that, while the state retained authority in setting policy, newly emergent associations like the AMSH and the BSHC assumed a shaming and

77 ‘First Report of the Advisory Committee on Social Hygiene’, 1927, Cmd 2501.
79 ‘Report of a Committee appointed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to examine and report on Straits Settlements Ordinance 15 of 1927 and Federated Malay States Enactment No. 18 of 1927.’
80 Manchester Guardian, 1 February 1928.
policy-driving power which went beyond that of nineteenth-century extra-parliamentary actors.

Despite their close affinity on abolition, the AMSH and the BSHC were rivals, competing for the ear of the Colonial Office. As a semi-official body, the BSHC was better placed in this contest, as its success in lobbying the government regarding Guillemard’s Ordinance demonstrated. Neilens wrote privately to individual members of the BSHC, including Dame Katharine Furse, criticizing their preference for gradual reform and again pressing the case for immediate abolition. The AMSH was especially critical of what it saw as the BSHC’s equivocation in countenancing compulsory testing of prostitutes as an interim step towards eventual abolition. Furse responded by criticizing the AMSH for pronouncing on a subject—the ordinances—upon which she believed it was ignorant. Neilens replied indignantly that ‘in the long run, [our] “fanatical” principles are generally proved right and become quite fashionable’. Neilens also criticized Rolfe, charging that because a fact-finding trip by the latter to British Malaya in 1925 was funded by the government, Rolfe, and by extension the BSHC, were not in a position to assess fairly the CO’s policy of toleration and gradual reform. The AMSH’s public stance against regulation also led to it being attacked at public forums in Singapore.

The BSHC received £9,615 from the Colonial Office in 1925, and had previously received similar annual sums from the Ministry of Health. The AMSH, meanwhile, was perpetually in dire financial straits, and could not lever financial resources for influence. As such, it often adopted a more strident tone in its public and private lobbying efforts. It also worked hard to build alliances with voluntary organizations like the National Council of Women, a close ally during the Straits Settlements controversy. This alliance was profitable because, as a member of the International Council of Women, the National Council of Women was able to lobby directly the League of Nations on a wide array of women’s issues, including international trafficking.


83 Neilens to Mrs John Clay, 28 November 1927. AMSH 3/AMS/5/14 (Malaya 1924–).

84 Neilens to Katherine Furse, head of BSHC, 8 December 1927. AMSH 3/AMS/5/14 (Malaya 1924–).

85 ‘Is the BSHC an official organization?’, nd. but 1925. AMSH 3/AMS/5/14 (Malaya 1924–).

86 O. B. Schill, National Council of Women to Neilens, 22 November 1927. AMSH 3/AMS/5/14 (Malaya 1924–).
The imperial work of voluntary organizations paralleled growing international awareness of the trafficking issue. As revealed in Britain’s Asian colonies, trafficking was a transnational endeavour, and voluntary organizations pursued both international and imperial solutions. Above all, they looked to the League of Nations for action. Their lobbying led to the seminal moment in the international campaign against trafficking, the League of Nations’ 1927 Report. The League was entrusted to combat the problem through its Covenant. In 1921 it changed the crime’s name from ‘white slave trade’ to the ‘traffic in women and children’ to stress that race was not an issue in its mission, a semantic shift which paralleled the leavening of racial language in inter-war imperial discourse. The League was particularly concerned with international trafficking, defined as ‘the direct or indirect procuration and transportation for gain to a foreign country of women and girls for the sexual gratification of one or more other persons’.87 In addition to the 1921 League conference, the trafficking issue was also addressed at the International Diplomatic Emigration Conference in Rome in 1924 and the 1923 Imperial Conference in London, in part at the behest of the AMSH.88 The AMSH and the IBSTWC also opposed what they saw as many continental countries’ laissez-faire attitudes to organized prostitution, and pressed the League for action. A central component of their lobbying efforts was to publicize stories of ‘continental excess’, such as the so-called ‘Strasbourg Scandal’ in 1925:

[a] Gymnastic Fête was being held there comprising young gymnasts aged from 13 to 18 from all parts of the Continent. Strasbourg has a street of maisons tolérées and on three nights were seen long queues of young lads mostly from 16 to 18, but many from 13 to 16, lined up outside these places. The police had been specially appealed to to enforce the regulation that no men under 18 may be admitted to these houses, but not a single policeman appeared during the whole time. Disgraceful scenes took place and the affair has created a great sensation among the inhabitants of the town.89

88 The AMSH lobbied the 1923 Imperial Conference to ensure the 1921 TWC treaty applied in Britain’s mandates [the treaty did]. Minutes of the Investigation, Organization and Parliamentary sub-committee, 29 October 1923. AMSH, 3/AMS/1/1/04. The AMSH also wrote to the International Diplomatic Emigration Conference protesting against moves to place restrictions on young women travellers: ‘better treatment of women emigrants should be seriously considered to insure that no harassing restrictions should be laid on the personal freedom of adult women and that no restrictions should be made for such women that do not apply to all emigrants without respect to sex’. Ibid., AMSH, 3/AMS/1/1/05, 16 May 1924.
89 Minutes of the Overseas Committee (Foreign Affairs Committee until July 1922). AMSH, 3/AMS/1/3/05, 8 July 1925.
Activists also believed trafficking was fostered by an amoral environment created by linked vice crimes such as the trade in drugs and obscene publications.

Such lobbying activity, however, was limited by a lack of empirical data about the international trafficking trade, leaving activists open to claims that they were fear-mongering. The main reason for this lacuna was of course that the trade operated mainly underground. Furthermore, some governments, such as Brazil, estimated that up to 80 per cent of its prostitutes were foreign born, while others, such as Switzerland or the United States, regularly deported foreign-born prostitutes. The IBSTWC thus pressed the League to gather data from its members, and thus to implicitly press these governments to adopt a co-operative legislative position on the trade. The result was the 1927 Report, which gathered information from both traffickers and prostitutes to produce a detailed account of how the trade operated. The Report focused mainly on Europe and the Mediterranean basin, reflecting the composition of League membership. The interviewees, who were granted anonymity, were mostly individuals who had been charged with an offence or whose collaboration had been solicited by League field workers.

The Report’s findings concerning the reasons for demand accorded with the findings of campaigners in the Straits Settlements affair: countries with high male ratios; temporary markets arising from seasonal or fluid population movement; the establishment of clubs where prostitution was allowable; military camps or industrial sites where many men were single or away from wives; and the presence of vice districts and licensed houses. The traffickers themselves were a disparate group—the principals (generally brothel owners), madames who managed the brothels, souteneurs who trafficked women, and intermediary agents who brought the others into contact. The interconnectivity of these actors was born out in testimony. ‘31-P’, a souteneur, told his interviewer that ‘you know...a girl has to have a boy (a souteneur) and he [‘31 P’] turns them over to [the boys] and he gets a nice few hundred dollars every time’. ‘25-T’, an agent, underscored the international nature of the trade: ‘whenever the madames want new girls they let me know. I can always place their new girls for them. They (the madames) pay all travelling expenses. You see, what is old here is new [there].’ The Report found that, in addition to women

92 Ibid., 13–15.
93 Ibid., 25, 17.
who were already prostitutes, traffickers sought to entice ‘semi-professional’ and ‘complacent’ girls into the international trade. Such women, often artists or entertainers, were seduced into the trade by *souteneurs* who made them mistresses and brought them on trips. According to one Hungarian performer’s testimony:

I played at 513-X in Vienna and also at several first-class places in Budapest. We spend a week here and there. We go to 478-X in Constantinople. From there we go to Egypt. I get my fare paid and a small salary. I pick up a few dollars from the drink money, and now and then I meet a nice man… and in that way I live.

Such women were often brought abroad on artistic contracts, and then forced into prostitution in part by the low wages paid. In Salonica, for instance, the League commission found that 28 out of the 30 women it interviewed in cabarets and café concerts were being prostituted. The League estimated that, at a minimum, ‘many hundreds’ of girls were transported across national borders each year. The commission also estimated that at least 10 per cent, and probably more, of internationally-traded prostitutes were under-age.⁹⁴

The commission paid particular attention to the logistics of international trafficking, for it was this element of the trade that most confounded authorities. It found that *souteneurs* travelled by various established routes. The most prominent routes linked Black Sea and Mediterranean ports, where mainly (though not exclusively) East European women were procured, with destinations in North Africa, the Levant, and Latin America. Traffickers often stopped along the way to make money or to ‘break in’ the girl(s) they were trafficking. One Algerian *souteneur*, ‘64-P’, said he ‘[knew] a boy who went to Constantine and got himself a beauty—only 17 years old—a Jewish girl. He brought her here [Algiers] and put her in the game. She at first raised hell, but he took her to another country, and now they are both getting along fine.’ *Souteneurs* often took out multiple passports to ensure they would not be caught, and some even still smuggled women on commercial steam ships, though that practice was dying out.⁹⁵

Traffickers and madames kept women in their employ through a variety of intimidation tactics. A common strategy was to lend women money on first meeting, and then use the debt to keep them pliant. This situation could become so oppressive that many women preferred to leave and work on the street, as one Vienna prostitute reported:

They [the house] threw us all out in the street about four years ago. It’s much better. I wouldn’t work in a house again at any price.

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⁹⁴ Ibid., 17–19, 43, 20.
⁹⁵ Ibid., 31–32.
I make good money. I am my own boss. I can walk where I want. I can pick the men I want to. Why, it was terrible in those houses. You had only one day a week off. Some days I had to take fifteen men. With all I worked I had nothing to show.96

Souteneurs sometimes even married girls to get them into trade:

On August 10, 1925, the Police officials prevented a French minor, 18 years old, coming from Nimes, from embarking at Marseilles for Tunis. She was travelling on a false livret de famille as the wife of the trafficker who brought her on board ship. The man disappeared when the girl was questioned. She looked much younger than the age figuring on her papers. She could not state the date of her marriage. The names of her parents and the place of birth did not correspond with those of the real wife of the trafficker. When the truth came to light she confessed that the man was sending her to a brother in Tunis.97

As this last case illustrates, efforts to combat the trade had begun to take root by the mid-1920s, due to the efforts of both the League and international voluntary organizations. As one souteneur said, ‘[i]t costs a lot to travel and a boy can get tripped easy now. The League of Nations is looking after that thing. We all know what is going on.’98

The anti-trafficking campaign’s public popularity was revealed when the League’s 1927 Report sold its first run of five thousand copies within a few weeks of its publication, a rare feat for what was in essence an international policy document.99 The campaign even featured as a prominent plot device in Evelyn Waugh’s Decline and Fall (1928). More importantly, it galvanized international co-operative action. The International Labour Office’s efforts to regulate immigration and labour legislation helped close some of the gaps in international labour law through which the trafficking trade operated, and greater cooperation was fostered between national governments. Central authorities with jurisdiction over the trade were established in each state, ports of entry were more diligently monitored, more states pledged to repatriate trafficked prostitutes, employment agencies (a common means of luring women into prostitution) were monitored, migrants’ identities were authenticated with greater vigilance, voluntary groups in different nations collaborated more closely, and, perhaps most importantly, there was a movement to harmonize formal legislation against the trade in most League member states.

96 Ibid., 23.
97 Ibid., 32.
98 Ibid.
The League, the IBSTWC and the AMSH all saw the existence of licensed brothels in some countries as an egregious source of traffic for all nations. They thus argued that harmonizing legislation to prevent maison tolerées, whether in imperial possessions like the Straits Settlements or fellow League nations like France, was of particular importance. As Table 1 shows, anti-trafficking lobbying had by the late
1920s achieved some degree of legislative harmonization regarding regulation in League member states.

The League commenced an enquiry in 1930 to report on prostitution in Asia, where the problem was most prevalent, as a supplement to the 1927 Report. The Colonial Office recognized the need to fight trafficking in Asia following the publication of the 1927 League Report, but was concerned that to launch official measures in advance of the League’s Asia report would be to admit to running a system which ‘we were... ashamed of’. The Colonial Office thus opposed immediate reforms, as suggested by Rolfe and other voluntary association leaders, and instead favoured gradual change as promised through the League enquiry: ‘only harm would be done by a sudden and partially informed effort undertaken for the purpose of “safeguarding British prestige in the International Field”’. Whitehall was concerned with the trafficking issue for reasons of national prestige, though it preferred that the League provide direction and thus take responsibility. This was in part because local government (in this case colonial governors in Asia) tended to be on the defensive when they received missives from the Colonial Office, reflecting systemic competition for autonomy between the metropole and the periphery.

The Colonial Office’s reticence on the trafficking issue reflected broader opposition in official circles to the growing influence of international non-governmental bodies and the League. Sir Austen Chamberlain, for instance, argued that the League’s Child Welfare Committee impinged upon issues of national autonomy:

these subjects are certainly of high importance but they do not call for international regulation. There would seem to me to be danger for the League in thus invading the purely national sphere of its Member States lest those States should be indisposed by the interference and the real purpose of the League be obscured.101

The response of national governments in Asia was similarly reticent. For their part, Japan and China were amenable to the League Enquiry as long as it looked at the whole region, not just one country. This position reflected both countries’ desire to deflect international attention from their own minimal domestic standards, but also a grudging willingness to acquiesce with international standards as the price of entry to the international community. Such opinions explain why the

100 Colonial Office circular, 14 May 1930. TNA: PRO CO 323/1070/3.
102 Copy, Statements at 5th Committee of the 10th Assembly of the League of Nations, 12 September 1929, Colonial Office circular, 14 May 1930. TNA: PRO CO 323/1070/3.
1927 League Report did not immediately prompt a concerted international response, to the disappointment of activists like Rolfe.

Rolfe continued to lobby British officials to take immediate action against trafficking in British Asia. Writing in 1930 to Dr Drummond Shields, Under-Secretary for the Colonies, she stated that she was ‘very disturbed’ that the government was not going to press reforms in Hong Kong before the League enquiry reported. Invoking the government’s own language of national prestige, she argued that Britain’s international reputation would be harmed if purported abuses were not rectified before the League’s representatives arrived. Prostitution was quite overt in Hong Kong, she warned: ‘brothel keepers [in Hong Kong] bring down the inmates of the brothels in the evenings, hire sampans, and take them out to the ships, without any question being raised by Harbour Authorities’. Rolfe suggested that, following the lead of Singapore and Colombo, Hong Kong should prevent the entry of known prostitutes, reform the Po Leung Kuk, and abolish tolerated houses. She also linked the anti-trafficking campaign to the parallel fight there against mui tsai. Finally, she rejected ‘the attitude of the European official...that the Chinese standard of sex morality is so entirely different from that of the European that no public support could be expected’. Rolfe did support the League in its opposition to the acceptance (tacit or otherwise) of commercialized prostitution, but also approved of health and treatment reforms in Singapore which saw women under treatment rise from 6000 to 20,000 between 1926 and 1927. Her position reveals the paradox which confronted reformers: while they favoured abolition as the best solution to the problem of prostitution, treatment plans for those infected with venereal diseases necessitated some form of state regulation.

There are two notable conclusions to draw from the anti-trafficking campaign pursued in the 1920s. First, it reveals an intersection of imperial and international actors and reforms. While voluntary associations identified problems within the empire, as shown in the Straits Settlements controversy, they concluded that such problems were manifestations of a truly international issue, and thus that efforts to solve them must also become international. As such, the AMSH reached out, through the IBSTWC, to work with anti-trafficking activists in other countries, and looked especially to the League of Nations as a platform upon which to base this international work. The League’s 1927 Report provided empirical information on the traffic in women and children, overturned harmful myths which had impeded earlier

103 Rolfe to Dr Drummond Shields, MP, 8 May 1930. TNA: PRO CO 323/1070/3.
104 Rolfe to Under Sec of State, Colonial Office, 8 November 1927. TNA: PRO CO 273/539/5.
reforms, and enabled governments and voluntary associations to speak a common language.

Second, the anti-trafficking reforms most commonly prescribed, notably the end of regulated prostitution, focused primarily on the supply side of the problem rather than on regulating or combating demand. What was new was that instead of blaming prostitutes for their own position, international actors increasingly blamed those who ran the system. Voluntary reform groups thus conceived of the problem as an international systemic one which demanded coordinated participation from national domestic constituencies. Though the interrelationship between domestic and international affairs is sometimes portrayed as a marker of late twentieth-century globalization, the cases of the Straits Settlements controversy and the League’s anti-trafficking work demonstrate that it in fact has a long history. Inter-war reformers were convinced that they could impart their own normative moral and political positions abroad. This conviction legitimized transgression of other states’ sovereignty, but also heightened awareness of the international nature of many social and political problems, and demonstrated that nation-states were unable to solve them unless they acted internationally.

It was in this manner that British women entered international politics via imperial humanitarianism. Here the work of the AMSH and the IBSTWC matched Virginia Woolf’s later injunction in *Three Guineas* that ‘as a woman my country is the whole world’. Just as Woolf argued that women could be more effective agents for international peace than men because their inferior domestic social position meant they were less tainted by a sense of patriotism, so too did inter-war voluntary associations apply the moral purpose they had first deployed against inequities at home to international problems. Women activists could operate more freely and influentially in the international sphere because they were freed from the restrictions of citizenship which circumscribed their participation in domestic politics. The very lack of democratic accountability which critics have identified as a weakness of international politics thus worked to the advantage of previously marginalized political actors, including women. International politics was more amenable to pressure politics, lobbying, and what is now termed public diplomacy, all skills in which the new women’s voluntary societies became proficient. The network of voluntary organizations which developed after the First World War functioned as a nascent epistemic community, gathering more detailed information

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on issues than did authorities, developing dense networks of like-minded bodies, and levering this informational and organizational capability to press officials for action. As such, they can be viewed as progenitors of later twentieth-century non-governmental organizations.

The activities of the AMSH and other humanitarian groups also illustrate a shift away from strategies of formal imperial rule which had dominated British imperial thought from the 1880s, back to a concern for ‘influence’ which would have been familiar to Pitt, Canning, or Palmerston. Yet, unlike Palmerston, there were more than just ‘interests’ at stake. While ideas and interests are often taken to be dichotomous in international relations—as, for instance, in the gulf between Britain’s expressed support for collective security between the wars and its lacklustre record of action—they can sometimes work in tandem. The humanitarian imperialism of the AMSH was one such case. A moral imperative to improve social conditions abroad, and the unquestioned assumption that it was their right and duty to do so, was both a principled and causal belief of the AMSH. The AMSH thus reflected a growing conviction amongst liberal imperialists in the 1920s that it was permissible to intervene in the sovereign affairs of other states or colonies on moral grounds. Imperialism still had a place in the post-war world, but it was a more progressive imperialism. Leonard Woolf spoke for many in the internationalist camp in portraying internationalism and its central institution, the League, as an evolution of, not an alternative to, empire. This essentially Fabian conviction set Woolf and other post-war internationalists apart from their doctrinaire Marxist brethren on the left, for whom internationalism could only be truly realized through international socialism, and who looked east to Bolshevik Russia in the inter-war years.

Maternalist women’s organizations, finally, were drawn to internationalism because it freed them from the strictly masculine power structures of domestic politics. It is telling that Rachel Crowdy became head of the Opium and Social Questions Section of the League of Nations in 1919, a full decade before a woman held a cabinet position in the British government. If women still faced many gendered barriers in international humanitarian work, they nonetheless found in that sphere a freedom of action often denied them in domestic politics.

109 Margaret Grace Bondfield, Minister of Labour in the second Labour administration (1929–1931), was Britain’s first female cabinet minister. She had also been the first female minister, serving as parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Labour in the 1924 Labour government.