

Article

# Sending a Dear John Letter: Public Information Campaigns and the Movement to “End Demand” for Prostitution in Atlanta, GA

Samantha Majic

Department of Political Science, John Jay College—CUNY, 524 W 59th St, New York, NY 10019, USA; smajic@jjay.cuny.edu

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**Abstract:** This paper examines “Dear John”, a public information campaign that ran from 2006–2008 in Atlanta, GA, to ask what narrative it conveys about commercial sex and those who engage in it, in order to understand the gendered (and other) discursive constructions it produces, reflects, and complicates about these activities and subjects. Drawing from both policy and sex work/trafficking scholarship, this paper argues that Dear John used symbolic images and direct and consequential text to convey a “male demand” narrative, which holds that men’s demand for sexual services harms girls and young women and will not be tolerated. Yet, in so doing, Dear John also reinforced particularly gendered characterizations of individuals who trade sex, while de-emphasizing other factors that increase young peoples’ vulnerabilities to and within sex work. The paper concludes by discussing Dear John’s outcomes and significance for scholars concerned with sex work, policy, and social change.

**Keywords:** public information campaigns; sex trafficking; sex work; narratives; gender; interpretive methods

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## 1. Introduction

In the United States and internationally, a narrative has emerged in public and political debates that holds that women and girls are universally victimized when they engage in sex work, and that men are the primary cause of this victimization through their purchase and/or other facilitation of commercial sexual services.<sup>1</sup> In response to what is understood as gender-based violence, policymakers and advocates have created various laws and policies targeting men to end their demand for commercial sex. Currently, in the United States, at least 1078 sites (cities, counties, etc.) employ various “demand reduction” tactics aimed towards reducing prostitution and sex trafficking (Abt Associates & National Institutes of Justice 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid conflating voluntary and coerced sex work and stigmatizing those involved in these activities, a note on terms is important. I use “sex work” in reference to a range of legal and illegal sexual activities that are voluntarily exchanged for cash or other trade, and I use “prostitution” in reference to the specific form of sex work that is criminalized in the majority of the US. I use “sex trafficking” and/or “commercial sexual exploitation” (CSE, the term used by advocates in Atlanta) to describe a commercial sex act induced by force, fraud, or coercion. I refer to persons who engage in these activities as sex workers or “person who trade sex”, and minors (persons under 18) as “young people who trade sex”. I refer to “girls and young women” when specifying the gendered population of minors that is the target of Dear John. Additionally, following Marcus et al. (2014), I use “purchasers” in reference to those who purchase sexual services, and “facilitators” regarding third parties who procure commercial sexual services (to avoid the more derogatory terms “johns” and “pimps”, respectively). When quoting individuals directly, however, I provide their terms for the activities/persons they describe.

While many of these measures are punitive (e.g., arresting purchasers), various jurisdictions have developed educationally oriented policy interventions, and this paper focuses on a highly visible example of these: the public information campaign (PIC), defined as a “government-directed and sponsored effort to communicate to the public or a segment of the public in order to achieve a policy result” (Weiss and Tschirhart 1994, p. 82). Specifically, this paper will examine the campaign materials for Dear John, the nation’s best-known and most ambitious demand-reduction PIC, which ran from 2006–2008 in Atlanta, Georgia, and aimed to deter men from soliciting girls and young women for sexual services. The campaign’s reference to “Dear John” specifically addresses men who purchase sex (colloquially referred to as “johns”), and it plays on the “Dear John letter”, a term describing a letter that a girlfriend or wife sends to a man to end their relationship, most often when she has found someone else (Interview, Stephanie Davis, 11 January 2014).

Given its educational orientation, this paper asks what narrative the Dear John PIC conveys to the public about commercial sex and those who engage in it, and *how* it does this, in order to understand the gendered (and other) discursive constructions it produces, reflects, and complicates about these activities and subjects. Drawing from both policy and sex work/trafficking scholarship, and using qualitative–interpretive methods of data collection and analysis, I demonstrate that men were not historically targeted for purchasing sex in the Atlanta area until local advocates made it an issue of concern. Dear John thus conveyed an emergent “male demand” narrative, which holds that men’s demand for sexual services harms girls and young women and will not be tolerated. Yet a “thicker” (Shenhav 2005) analysis that considers *how* Dear John conveys this narrative, and the context of its development, indicates the discursive limits and contradictions of this (new) narrative and its related politics. Specifically, I show that even as Dear John did not use stereotypical images and stories of dark, predatory men and innocent white girls, its emphasis on individual men limited how it defined and addressed commercial sex. Namely, through symbolic images of easily identifiable characters/personas (a mayor, mom, and coach) and direct and consequential text, Dear John reinforced the idea that sex trading is a necessarily heterosexual phenomenon, where (English-speaking) men are dominative predators who perpetrate the majority of harms against always-victimized girls and young women. This individualistic focus meant that Dear John de-emphasized other factors that increase vulnerabilities to and within sex work. The paper concludes by discussing Dear John’s outcomes and significance for scholars concerned with sex work, policy, and social change.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholarship regarding policy narratives provides useful insights for understanding PICs, particularly those related to “ending demand” for prostitution. Interpretive communities create policies to express meanings, values and beliefs; in effect, policies reflect and tell stories (Price 2011). In the policy process, scholars indicate that individuals and communities use narratives to define and understand policy problems (Jones and McBeth 2010), and policymakers may initiate and/or adapt these narratives (or others) and implement them through laws and policies. Since narratives are the primary way that individuals process, organize and convey information, analyzing them is useful for identifying the ideas that shape public opinion and government action (Jones and McBeth 2010, pp. 330–31).

Policy narratives present a set of claims about the nature and scale of the policy problem, delineate the target population and causes of the problem (its “victims and villains”), and indicate how certain policy interventions will impact these problems. These narratological components are based on information from a range of sources, including popular claims, expert knowledge, and/or academic research (Boswell et al. 2011). When conveyed through the media and other sources, these narratives may “socially construct” an issue (a troublesome condition or behavior) by emphasizing particular claims about its causes and solutions (Best 2017; Best and Harris 2012). Consequently, policy narratives also socially construct ideas about their characters—they culturally characterize the persons or groups whose wellbeing and behavior will be affected by public policy (Schneider and Ingram 2005).

Given the variety of policy narratives for an issue, policymakers will commonly adopt one that is cognitively plausible and dramatically or morally compelling (Boswell et al. 2011). Since many policy narratives meet these criteria but never feature prominently on the policy agenda, they also must match with policymakers' political interests (Kingdon 1995). Factors influencing this match may include a broader "moral panic" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994, p. 149); partisanship and ideology; public opinion; and the proximity of an election (Jones and McBeth 2010).

While identifying a policy narrative's victims, villains, and solutions/heroes is certainly important, numerous scholars have questioned whether policy narratives have such easily identifiable elements, calling attention to the *power and politics* that develop and propel certain stories to prominence. As Deborah Stone (2002) writes, narratives are social constructions that are created by people conversing and arguing with others within their wider environment. Through storytelling, people evaluate their positions in their communities, grasp their communities' goals, and often work in coalitions with others to advance their interests (Fischer 2003; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). As a result, multiple and varied narratives may emerge regarding a single issue, and communities mobilize facts and ideas to convey and/or contest them.

Furthermore, scholars also indicate that since policies have ongoing moral and ethical implications, even after they have technically expired, we should embrace their ambiguity and learn from this instead (Fischer 2003; Sidney 2005). Therefore, according to Shenhav (2005), studying policy narratives must involve a "thick" analysis that identifies a narrative's components *and* the relationship between them in an effort to understand *how* the narrator's message is transmitted to the audience (e.g., by examining its rhetorical form). In short, a thick analysis identifies a policy narrative's components *and* their interactions and contestations; in so doing, it draws attention to the power relations and political struggles that create, shape, and convey it.

Overall, policy narrative scholarship has grown to cover a variety of issues, including nonprofit tax policy debates in the US Congress (Jacobs and Sobieraj 2007), migration policy debates in Europe (Boswell 2011), environmental problems (McBeth et al. 2010; Shanahan et al. 2013), and access to contraception in the United States (Price 2011; Rasmussen 2011), to name just some. The remainder of this paper draws on and adds to this scholarship by considering narratives and policies regarding prostitution and sex trafficking, and it does so by first reviewing, below, the "male demand" narrative's emergence and reflection in laws and policies that target men.

### *Prostitution Policy Narratives & PICs*

The notion that men's purchase of sexual services harms women—the heart of the contemporary male demand narrative in the US—can be traced to at least the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At this time, historians have documented that prostitution was framed largely in terms of morality and sin: while men who purchased sex were understood as corrupting innocent women, they were far less likely than women to be punished for their transgressions and subjected to various reform efforts (D'Emilio and Freedman 1997; Rosen 1982; Bowler et al. 2016). This tendency shifted with the "white slavery" panics regarding the allegedly rampant trafficking in women and girls into prostitution (Doezema 2010, p. 4). These panics reflected a larger boundary crisis that arose as urbanization, industrialization, and growing immigration sparked panics about the supposed dangers that foreign-born and/or non-white men posed to women, sexual propriety, and to the socio-economic order more broadly (Lutnick 2016; Donovan 2006). Not surprisingly, racialized and ethnicized portraits of the "hypersexualized, violent, organized bogeyman" (Horning and Marcus 2017, p. 2) soon emerged to characterize men who purchased or facilitated the purchase of sexual services. Through media stories, political discussions, and anti-vice campaigns, native-born whites variously employed narratives of sexual danger to groups including—but not limited to—new immigrant groups in Chicago, African Americans in New York City, and Chinese immigrants in San Francisco (Donovan 2006). The federal *Mann Act* was passed in 1910, in response to these racialized concerns, and since then, white supremacy in anti-prostitution/trafficking discourse has continued through stories where persons (men) who purchase sex are variously "found" in "Indian brothels,

Bangladeshi factories, Nigerian slums, Polish truck-stops, or Thai massage parlors” (Kempadoo 2015, p. 13).

Although there have never been reliable estimates of the numbers of men who purchase or otherwise facilitate commercial sex, contemporary attention to their actions escalated internationally throughout the 1990s, when media attention turned to stories of Latin American, Eastern European, and Asian women illegally trafficked to work in brothels in Western Europe and the U.S., among other locations (Soderlund 2005). In this climate, many feminists again turned their attention to prostitution and sex trafficking, and their efforts here took a “carceral” turn, calling for increased *punishment* of men who purchase and/or profit from the sale of sexual services (Bernstein 2010, p. 47). Aided by sensationalistic media stories about gallant rescues of trafficked victims, and by a deluge of dramatic films, the narrative that predatory men were eager and willing to capture (young) women for prostitution quickly became a “dominant cultural story” (Bamberg and Andrews 2004, p. 11). According to this narrative, voiced by advocates and scholars who often call themselves “prostitution abolitionists”,<sup>2</sup> women and girls should be diverted from the criminal justice system into social services that help them exit the sex industry, while purchasers and facilitators must be punished to end their “demand” for prostitution.

Indicating how groups mobilize facts and alternative stories to contest narratives, scholars and activists have criticized this “male demand” narrative for reinforcing gendered and racialized assumptions that all individuals who sell sex are naive and frequently white girls, while all men who buy sex—and particularly those who are non-white and/or not US-born—are presumably active agents who benefit from commercial sex (Bernstein 2010; Kempadoo 2015; Doezema 2010). Furthermore, emphasizing “demand” reflects a neoliberal emphasis on individual self-sufficiency by ignoring sex workers’ and trafficking victims’ demands for housing, living wages, and education, among other needs (Gira Grant 2014; Doezema 2010). Yet despite these criticisms, policymakers and members of the public have found the male demand narrative cognitively plausible and morally compelling, and it is reflected in laws and policies internationally. The first and most notable policy example that reflected this narrative emerged in 1998, in Sweden, when legislators criminalized purchasers of sexual services (mostly men) but not sellers (mostly women) (Crowhurst et al. 2012; Bucken-Knapp et al. 2014). Since then, a growing number of jurisdictions have taken steps to eradicate prostitution and sex trafficking, and many of these laws and policies target the demand for sexual services.

In the US specifically, while the sale and purchase of sexual services through prostitution has been variously criminalized over time<sup>3</sup>, policymakers have developed “educational” policies targeting men’s demand such as public information campaigns (PIC) that endeavor to raise public awareness about prostitution and sex trafficking, and to educate and deter men from purchasing sexual services *before* they are arrested. Governments, nonprofits, advocacy organizations, and for-profit companies (among others) may sponsor these PICs, which involve posters, newspaper advertisements, and/or videos. PICs are designed to generate specific behavioral/attitudinal outcomes by making policy issues “public” (Weiss and Tschirhart 1994, p. 82), presenting ideas and information, and arousing emotions (Dillard and Peck 2000). PICs exist regarding issues such as

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<sup>2</sup> Notable examples include Melissa Farley, Kathleen Barry, Donna Hughes, and Sheila Jeffreys.

<sup>3</sup> The majority of U.S. states criminalize prostitution to some degree, with the exception of eleven Nevada counties where prostitution is currently legal in brothels. Additionally, state and federal laws that target organized crime (e.g., prohibiting racketeering), kidnapping, and rape may also be used to target persons who facilitate commercial sex. Federal laws that address sex *trafficking* specifically emerged with the passage of the *Mann Act*, noted previously, and through treaties such as the *International Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic*, the first in a series of anti-human trafficking treaties that were initially negotiated in Paris in 1904. More recently, in response to advocates’ and policymakers concerns about sex trafficking, Congress passed the *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* (TVPA) in 2000. By 2013, all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and all but one U.S. territory enacted TVPA-like laws, and in 2015, the bipartisan Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act (JVTA) augmented the TVPA by increasing penalties for the trafficking of minors.

drunk driving (Dobash and Dobash 2000) and domestic violence (Wolfson 1995), to name just some examples.

Numerous anti-prostitution/trafficking PICs have appeared globally, and scholars have shown that they often reinforce particularly gendered, racialized, and sexualized constructions of sex workers and sex trafficking victims. These constructions include and are portrayed through descriptions of women as ideal victims who are vulnerable to the demands and desires of men, engage in sex work involuntarily, and are powerless, passive, and sexless/erotic objects (Andrijasevic 2007; Kimm and Sauer 2010; Schloenhardt et al. 2012; O'Brien 2013). And regarding men, these PICs tend to represent men as either predatory, dangerous, non-white "others" (Steele 2010, p. 34) who trick and lure women into sex work and other forms of labor, or as white Westerners who are "morally superior saviors" (Baker 2014, p. 218). Scholars thus argue that these social constructions misrepresent the actual extent to which women are trafficked by men into the sex industry (Matheson and Finkel 2013), fuel perceptions that all sex work is forced, and overlook the many other reasons why individuals engage in sex work (Kimm and Sauer 2010), such as to meet economic needs (Hoyle et al. 2011) or to explore their sexuality (Queen 1997). In so doing, these campaigns can legitimate criminalizing policies and practices that exacerbate sex workers' social vulnerability (Andrijasevic and Mai 2016), such as restrictive immigration policies (Kimm and Sauer 2010), and arresting young people who trade sex under the guise of protecting them (Musto 2016).

While this scholarship provides many insights about anti-trafficking/prostitution PICs globally (see for example O'Brien 2015), it has not considered US-based, *local* government-led PICs to a significant extent. Studying these is important because the US has positioned itself as the world leader in the fight against prostitution and sex trafficking, and many initiatives that educate the public about this issue are developed and implemented at the local level. Dear John, which ran from 2006–2008 in Atlanta, Georgia, was the longest running and most recognized government-sponsored anti-prostitution PIC in the U.S. to date. It provides a useful case for understanding not only its narrative about commercial sex, but how this was developed and conveyed. This analysis helps to reveal how policy narratives may both challenge and reinforce particular notions of commercial sex and those who engage in it, while defining (and limiting) the scope of related policy responses.

### 3. Materials & Methods

This paper draws on qualitative data that was analyzed through interpretive methods. Centrally, this data includes the campaign's materials: three print ads (Figures 1–3) and a 30 second public service video that was filmed in black and white and features the then mayor of Atlanta, Shirley Franklin, wearing a suit and corsage. In this video, she delivers the text of the print ad (Figure 1) to the camera, in a direct and authoritative voice.<sup>4</sup>

Stephanie Davis spearheaded these materials' development through the Atlanta mayor's office, where she served as Franklin's Advisor on Women's Issues. Dear John was largely funded by in-kind and private donations. Davis developed the majority of the campaign's copy and overall message as part of her job for the Mayor's office, and the public relations Edelman and Associates, along with Atlanta Women in Film, created the materials *pro bono*. Following the campaign's release, the Mayor's Office was able to raise \$100,000 from local donors and private foundations to extend Dear John's reach as paid advertising in the city's major publications (Shively et al. 2012).

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<sup>4</sup> This video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRsbo6g21hU>.

# DEAR JOHN

You have been abusing our kids, prostituting them and  
throwing them onto the street when you're done.

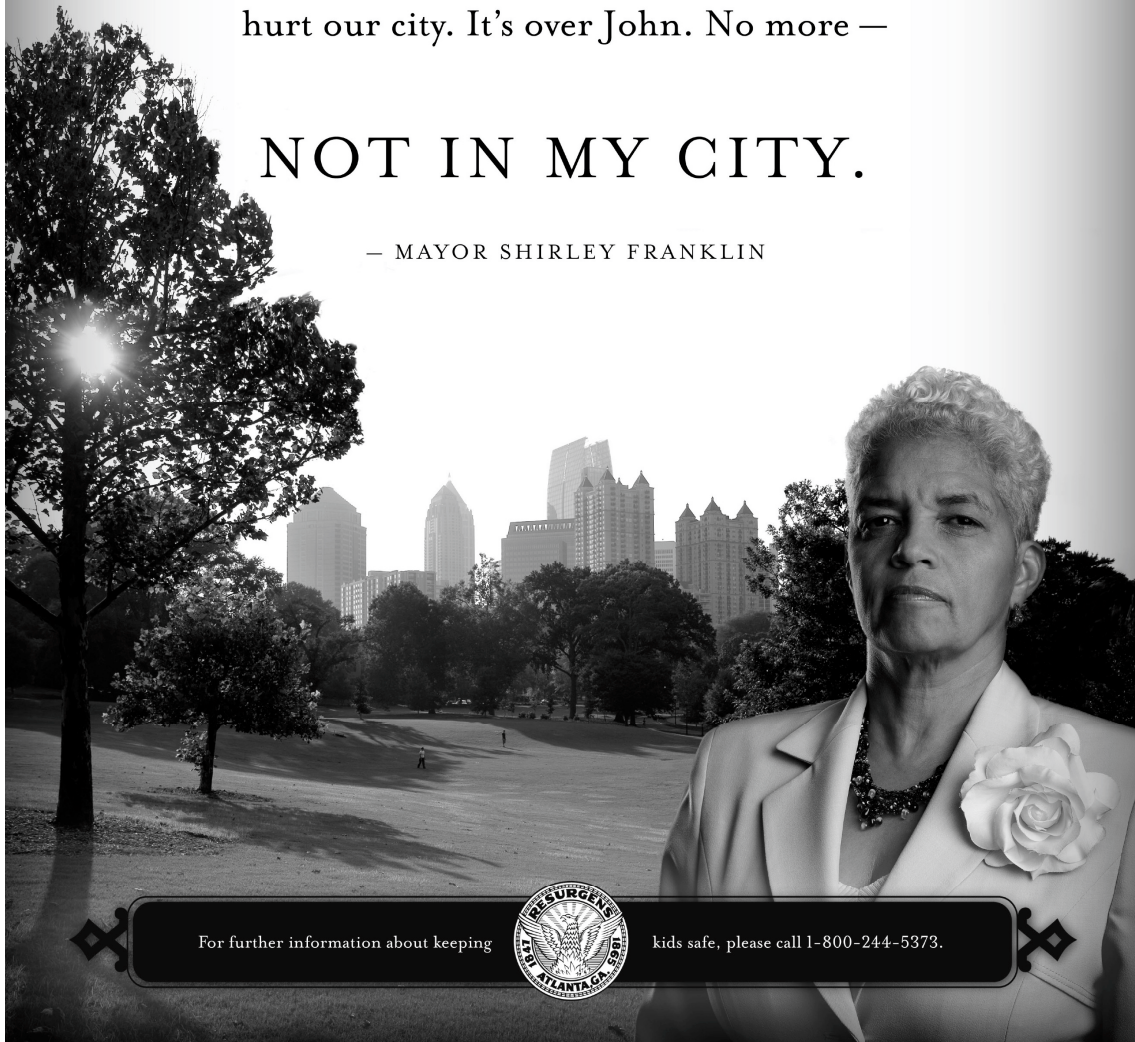
As Mayor of Atlanta, I have promised to listen to people.

Kids are no exception. When you buy sex from our kids,  
you hurt them, you hurt our families and you

hurt our city. It's over John. No more —

## NOT IN MY CITY.

— MAYOR SHIRLEY FRANKLIN



For further information about keeping



kids safe, please call 1-800-244-5373.

Figure 1. Dear John ad featuring Mayor Franklin.



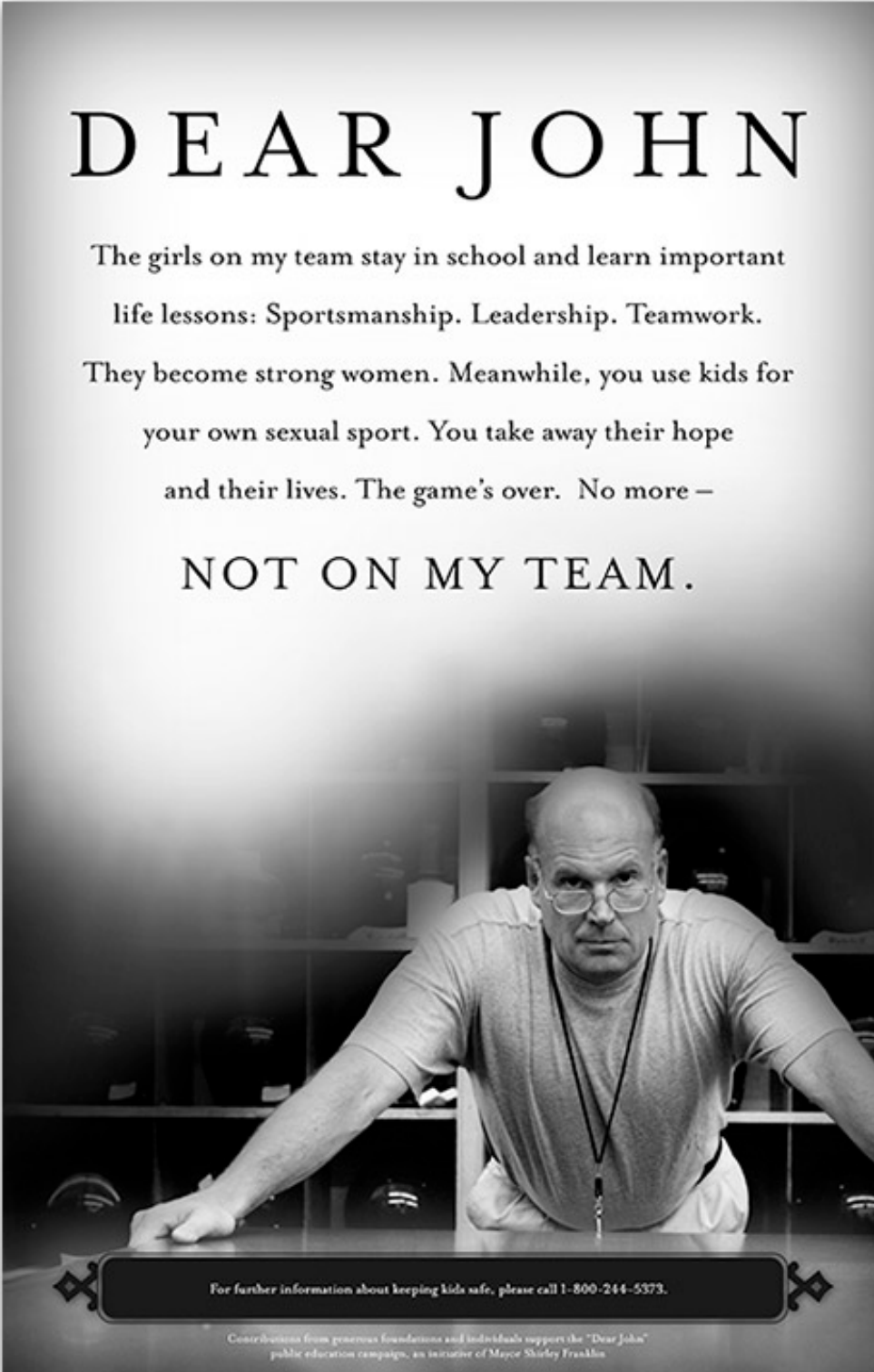
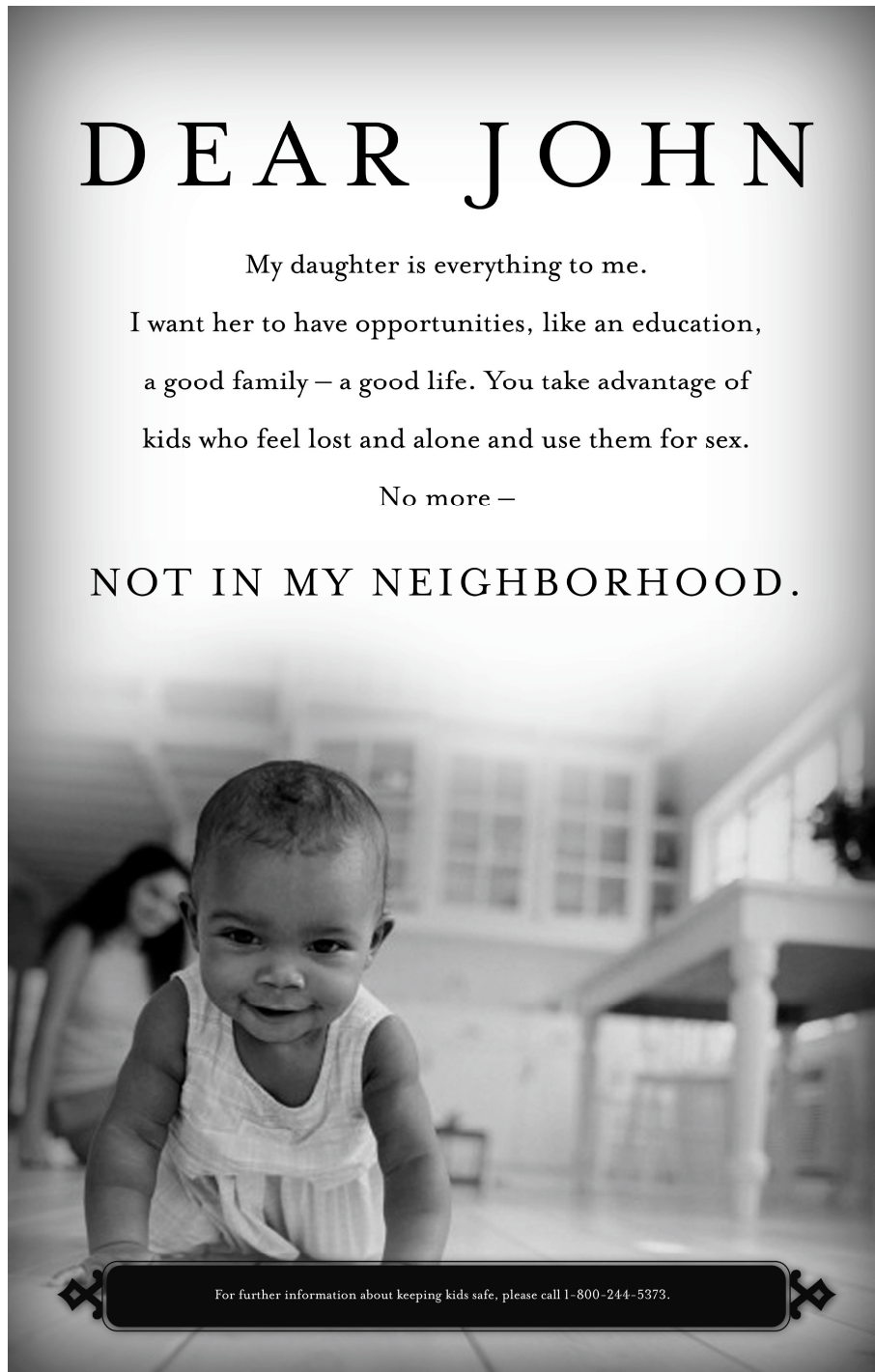
A black and white advertisement for the 'Dear John' campaign. The top half features the title 'DEAR JOHN' in large, bold, serif capital letters. Below the title is a block of text: 'The girls on my team stay in school and learn important life lessons: Sportsmanship. Leadership. Teamwork. They become strong women. Meanwhile, you use kids for your own sexual sport. You take away their hope and their lives. The game's over. No more – NOT ON MY TEAM.' The bottom half of the ad shows a man, presumably a coach, leaning forward on a table in a locker room. He is wearing glasses, a light-colored t-shirt, and a lanyard. The background shows shelves with sports equipment. At the bottom of the image, there is a dark banner with white text: 'For further information about keeping kids safe, please call 1-800-244-5373.' Below this banner, in smaller text, it says: 'Contributions from generous foundations and individuals support the "Dear John" public education campaign, an initiative of Mayor Shirley Franklin.'

Figure 2. Dear John ad featuring coach.



**Figure 3.** Dear John ad featuring baby.

To understand the context of Dear John’s development—namely the events and ideas that motivated and informed its creation—I also collected a range of qualitative data. This included documents relevant to the Dear John campaign, including media plans from Edelman & Associates, and national and local newspaper and magazine coverage. I also reviewed reports about demand reduction programs in the US from the National Institutes of Justice that were produced by Abt Associates (a research and consulting firm in Boston, MA, USA). To gain a broader contextual understanding of prostitution in the Atlanta area, I reviewed prostitution laws, arrest statistics, and media coverage of prostitution-related issues. All media coverage was found through Lexis Nexis database searches using key terms such as “Dear John”, “Atlanta” and “prostitution” (among others).

I also conducted twenty-two semi-structured, open-ended interviews in 2014 with individuals who had been directly involved in developing and/or administering Dear John in Atlanta, including



city officials, the District Attorney's (DA) Office, community activists concerned with gender and sex work issues, and representatives from NGOs that work with persons in the sex industry. I identified these individuals through a process of snowball sampling—some of these individuals were named frequently in various reports, and in news and scholarly articles related to Dear John and sex work issues in the Atlanta area. I asked those who agreed to an interview to recommend others with whom I might speak. Interviews covered topics such as the Dear John's history, development, operations, and efficacy.<sup>5</sup> Since not all interviewees offered information that was directly relevant to the questions this paper engages, I provide quotations from the following key informants, whose roles are described in more detail in the remainder of the paper: Stephanie Davis and Shirley Franklin; Nina Hickson; four representatives from the Atlanta District Attorney's Office, who met with me as a group; Melissa Mullinax and Kristin Canvan Wilson; and an official from the Atlanta group YouthSpark. My interview process received ethics clearance from my University's Human Research Protection Program (Project # 474713-2), and all interviewees gave their informed consent for the interviews.

To understand Dear John's narrative about commercial sex, I used interpretive methods of analysis (IMA), which takes language and other texts/artifacts seriously to uncover meanings and meaning-making practices in a given context, while understanding that multiple meanings are possible (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). In this case, the Dear John campaign is understood as a site of interpretation and expression (Warren and Karner 2015). As a result, I do not take the campaign materials "as is": instead, I understand them as a *problematizing* activity that represents and defines a (social) problem and its solutions in certain ways (Bacchi 2009). Therefore, this study does not presume that Dear John has a set meaning or impact for the researcher to uncover; instead, following Emmison et al. (2012, p. 5), I view the campaign materials as a "lived text" which can be investigated to uncover insights about values and norms. In so doing, I examine Dear John's campaign materials and the contextual data (interviews, articles, etc.) to understand the narrative it provides about commercial sex and those who engage in it *and* to interpret the discursive constructions and contestations it conveys about these activities and subjects.

My interpretive analysis of Dear John's materials thus involved what Rose terms a "critical visual methodology" (Rose 2012, p. 17) that takes the images and text seriously by looking for what they denote and connote (per Emmison et al. 2012), thinking about their social conditions and effects, and being up front about how my own perspective may inform this process. Specifically, I immersed myself in the campaign's visual images and textual statements and attended to their context of production through a critical feminist perspective. This perspective drew my attention to how "frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities" (Lazar 2007, p. 142), while also considering how notions of gender in Dear John intersected with and were compounded by multiple categories of social identity, including race, class, sexuality, etc. (Hancock 2007).

To illustrate: I examined Dear John's posters and video, looking for how its language and images conveyed recurring ideas about persons who sell and purchase sex. I also considered how particular contextual factors—namely the events and processes that preceded the PIC and influenced and informed its supporters—shaped and were reflected in Dear John. For example, local news coverage of a case where a woman was victimized by a purchaser could help to set the context and marshal support for a male demand narrative. My critical feminist perspective meant that I was especially attentive to how Dear John's images and text promoted certain gendered, racialized, and sexualized ideas about sex work and those who engage in it—by these ideas, I mean the tropes of innocent young white girls, predatory non-white men, etc. that scholars (noted above) have found in other anti-trafficking awareness efforts.

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<sup>5</sup> Since all of these interviews were conducted with adults (persons over the age of 18), many of whom were public figures, my University's Human Research Protection Program determined the project was one that posed "minimal risk" to participants. No unanticipated ethical or other problems arose during the course of my research interviews.

## 4. Results & Discussion

### 4.1. *The Male Demand Narrative in Atlanta & Dear John*

Since the 1980s, Atlanta has grown from a sleepy metropolis to an ethnically and economically diverse city with over 4 million residents: the city is majority-Black, and the area's Latino/a and Asian American populations have grown significantly. Atlanta has also developed a reputation as a business and conference hub in the southern United States with its world-class music and restaurant scene and numerous businesses and conference centers (Gallagher and Lacy 2003). However, as I explain below, local stakeholders argued that these features attracting business and people to Atlanta facilitate prostitution and young people's exploitation therein. Here they stated that the city of Atlanta "unwittingly provides a venue that facilitates the engagement of child sexual exploitation...via a major airport, frequency of hosting conventions and major sporting events, and proliferation of adult entertainment throughout the metropolitan area..." (Boxill and Richardson 2007, p. 144). Although an investigation by the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* (AJC) found that these claims about the rampant commercial sexual exploitation of children have never been systematically and conclusively verified (Mariano 2012), these stakeholders, who included advocates for women and children, the media, and the mayor's office, began challenging the historical tolerance of men's participation in prostitution. They constructed and mobilized a "new" interpretation that posited that men were commercially sexually exploiting a growing number of girls and young women in prostitution and must be punished for this under the law. In the remainder of this section, I present data from interviews and other sources that shows how these advocates worked to define male demand for sexual services as a policy problem that merited public and political attention.

Although the purchase of sexual services had long been criminalized in the state of Georgia, historically the enforcement of these laws was highly gendered.<sup>6</sup> The District Attorney and his colleagues explained in our interview that, traditionally, law enforcement rarely arrested and charged men who engaged in prostitution as purchasers or facilitators.<sup>7</sup> As a result, he stated that, "over the years, pimps had the view that Atlanta was 'open territory,' so johns also had the same beliefs—that this was a place where they could go because law enforcement took no substantive effort to decrease their activities... The tradition was that even if someone was caught for pimping, they went free..." (Interview, Atlanta District Attorney, 7 January 2014). However, it was not until the late 1990s/early 2000 that a concerted effort emerged in Atlanta to change these law enforcement practices and understandings of prostitution and sex work more broadly.

Even as national attention to human trafficking and men's roles in facilitating this had grown through the 1990s, as noted above, awareness about and efforts to address this in Atlanta were linked to local actors' experiences. Specifically, local political leaders, advocates and the media credited Nina Hickson, a former Fulton County juvenile court judge, for initially drawing attention to what she termed the "commercial sexual exploitation" (CSE) of children in the Atlanta area, based on what she observed in court (Boxill and Richardson 2007; Mariano 2012). She explained that when she was appointed to the juvenile bench in 1999, she witnessed a growing number of girls in her court, and she was struck by one 13-year old "who was found with nothing on but a tank top, and was...missing from home... [and had been] 'groomed' by a pimp." However, Hickson could not get the DA involved with cases like these because "pimping at the time was only a misdemeanor offense" (Interview, Nina Hickson, 6 January 2014). Hickson sought to change this story: she wanted the police

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<sup>6</sup> Prior to *Dear John*, prostitution and related crimes such as pimping and pandering (so labeled) were and are predominantly criminalized under Title 16: Chapter 6 (Crimes and Offenses: Sexual Offenses) of Georgia's state code. And regarding sex trafficking, in 2001, Georgia passed the *Child Sexual Commerce Protection Act*, which criminalized the purchase of sexual services from minors and specified that minors could not be charged with prostitution. As well, Section 106 of Atlanta's Code of Ordinances further prohibits engaging in and profiting from prostitution.

<sup>7</sup> This claim is sustained by state prostitution arrest statistics provided by Cheryl Payton (Cheryl.Payton@gbi.ga.gov), a program manager with the Georgia Crime Information Center (email correspondence, 6 April 2017).

and the District Attorney to ensure *the men* who purchased sex from girls and young women were arrested and taken to court.

To this end, Hickson began forming a coalition, which scholars have identified as important for changing and advancing policy narratives (Fischer 2003). To do this, she coordinated with Deborah Richardson, who she knew for her work on various human service initiatives, to gather a group of women in the city who were variously concerned about issues impacting women and children. These women included Nancy Boxill, the first woman elected to the Fulton County Board of Commissioners, whose policy initiatives focused on children and families; Stephanie Davis, the founder of the Atlanta Women's Foundation; and Susan May, who worked with Richardson on community and human service initiatives (Boxill and Richardson 2007).<sup>8</sup> Hickson explained that she gathered these women to "address this issue [that men were not punished for "pimping"]" (Interview, 6 January 2014) by bringing it to city's attention. And so at their initial meeting in 2000, they set the following goals: "first, tell the women in Atlanta about this horror; second, change the [pimping] law from a misdemeanor to a felony; and third, raise money to provide an appropriate treatment facility for the girls as an alternative to incarceration" (Boxill and Richardson 2007, p. 146).

To achieve these goals, these advocates took various measures to make the male demand narrative a prominent story. First, to alert the public that girls and young women—not adult men—were being arrested for prostitution and related offenses, Hickson published an op-ed in the *AJC*, in June 2011, titled "An Epidemic of Tragic Proportions" (Hickson 2000), that explained what she saw in court. Next, the advocates organized themselves as a Women's Taskforce in July 2000, and in November 2000 they began planning a meeting to raise awareness and engage and inform the broader community about these issues. They sent over 300 invitations to "the president of every women's group we could find, including bridge clubs, garden clubs, professional and religious organizations, social clubs, sororities, and recreational clubs". In response "more than 80 women gathered to begin the end of the sexual exploitation of children in Atlanta", and a federal prosecutor from the Office of the Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Georgia also made a surprise appearance (Boxill and Richardson 2007, p. 147).

Since their various legislative and fundraising initiatives would require public support, the advocates enlisted Jane O. Hansen, a staff writer with the *AJC*, to write about CSE, and she published an article series that ran in the front section of the paper from 7–9 January 2001, with subsequent pieces in the spring of that year. Hansen's articles publicly reinforced particularly gendered notions of men who purchase and/or facilitate sexual services, namely "dominative masculinity"—the "image of the selfish, aggressive, dominative man who desires sexual capture of women" (Young 2003, p. 4). In just one example of how her articles portrayed this form of masculinity, she wrote that men who acted as what she termed pimps "speak of the need to control the minds of prostitutes, even longing for the good old days when it was easier to get away with "hanger whupping" and "stick whupping" prostitutes to keep them in line" (Hansen 2001, p. A1).

Altogether, these efforts emphasized that men facilitated women's and girls' exploitation in the sex industry and grabbed the public and political leaders' attention. Hickson and her fellow advocates pushed for legislative changes targeting purchasers and facilitators more harshly (they hired a law firm to draft this legislation, pro bono). But indicating how narratives and policy change often involve processes of contestation, Hickson stated that

Yes, there was legislative resistance. Some legislators said that we already had laws (for statutory rape, etc.) that would cover this issue, but the DAs [district attorneys] were not using them because these are hard cases to make. Many girls don't see themselves as victims because of their relationship with their pimps, so it is hard to get them to testify. Also, these girls often run away—their defenses are high and they are not easy children to deal with. Many [legislators] see [the girls] as "asking for it". Also, some legislators just said that prostitution will always be with us. (Interview, Nina Hickson, 6 January 2014)

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<sup>8</sup> Only Hickson and Davis were available for interviews.

Yet despite this initial resistance, Hickson et al.'s efforts made the case that men were exploiting girls and young women when they purchased sex, and this sparked a rapid succession of legislative reforms and law enforcement investigations, many of which targeted men. In 2001, in addition to passing the *Child Sexual Commerce Protection Act*, the Georgia State Legislature signed Senate Bill 33 (SB-33) into law, changing the penalty for pimping a minor from a misdemeanor to a felony. Soon, law enforcement began to target men, most notably in 2002 when the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] and the Atlanta Police Department arrested eleven men who acted as pimps in a prostitution ring that targeted girls as young as 10 years old. But instead of simply charging them with pimping (which came with a five-to-twenty-year sentence under the newly revised *Child Sexual Commerce Protection Act*), they were charged under the federal *Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act* (RICO). The two most prominent leaders of the prostitution ring, known as Sir Charles and Batman, were given 30 and 40-year sentences under RICO, respectively, and described in the media as "notorious", "violent", and "destroying children's lives" (Hansen 2002). In addition to these legislative and law enforcement victories, advocates secured \$1 million in state and private funds to open Angela's House, a six-bed safe house and treatment facility for female victims of trafficking (Mariano 2012).

With this momentum, Hickson et al. found support for ending men's demand for commercial sex in Shirley Franklin, who was elected in 2002 as Atlanta's first female and fourth African American mayor. Franklin knew the members of the Women's Taskforce from their work related to women, children, and families, and she appointed Stephanie Davis as her Advisor on Women's Issues (Interview, Shirley Franklin, 9 January 2014). Davis explained that they "decided to focus on the prostitution of kids in Atlanta because no one would oppose it." Nevertheless, she and Mayor Franklin decided to collect more information about the scope of this problem in Atlanta because they had hitherto relied largely on media accounts and courtroom observations to support their cause (Interview, Stephanie Davis, 11 January 2014). The resulting study, *Hidden in Plain View: The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Girls in Atlanta* (Priebe and Suhr 2005), was based largely on a review of 35 individual case files from the Fulton County Juvenile Court, and it argued that the majority of the city's CSE victims are African American girls with an average age of 14. Although the report mentioned that survival needs and family distress often motivated girls and young women to trade sex, it emphasized that facilitators (and their so-called "recruiters") "groom" the girls with special attention and drugs before they "turn them out" (Priebe and Suhr 2005, p. 17)

These findings helped Davis and Franklin think about next steps. As Shirley Franklin stated, *In Plain View* "caused us to think about what issue to focus on—it became clear that victims had circumstances [that needed to be addressed], but there was little public discussion about the issue of demand [for prostitution]" (Interview, Shirley Franklin, 9 January 2014). The report also suggested a number of policy solutions to promote this discussion, including "a metro-wide information campaign, targeting men, about the statutory consequences of soliciting sex from a minor and the impact of CSE on children" that would "inspire action among those in government and nongovernmental organizations who could do something to combat demand for commercial sex" (Priebe and Suhr 2005, p. 37). And so, according to Franklin, their first initiative was "stating the obvious that this activity [engaging children in commercial sex] was not welcome in the city" (Interview, Shirley Franklin, 9 January 2014). The Dear John PIC made this statement.

The campaign, including the video and three print ads, was launched on 8 November 2006, at a major media event at City Hall that was headlined by Mayor Franklin. Following the launch, Dear John's print and video materials were widely disseminated in Atlanta between 2006 and 2008, garnering "over 7 million print impressions" (Edelman & Associates 2008, p. 3). The print ads appeared in several local publications; however, Mayor Franklin's graphic (Figure 1) appeared the most frequently because her office offered it to news outlets that requested a single image. The Mayor's video appeared on television, mainly on local stations that "ran it for free during slow media times. [But] it was also available on the city's website" (Shively et al. 2012, p. 3). Dear John also received national media attention from the *New York Times*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Reuters*, *60 Minutes*, *48 Hours*, and *Anderson Cooper 360*, and the video won an Emmy Award for "Best Public Service

Announcement” in 2007, which the city leveraged for another summer of free airtime at Atlanta’s three TV major networks (Shively et al. 2012, p. 4) The US Conference of Mayors also awarded Dear John the top prize in the “Law and Order” category at the World Leaders Forum.

#### 4.2. *Dear John: Telling a Story*

Given the context from which Dear John emerged, and its extensive dissemination and recognition, what narrative did it convey to the public, and how did it do this? As the following pages demonstrate, Dear John conveyed key thematic elements of the emergent male demand narrative regarding the victims, causes (“villains”), and solutions to the problem of men’s CSE of girls and young women. In discussing how this PIC conveyed these elements, I offer a thicker interpretive analysis, which indicates that through symbolic images and consequential text, Dear John reinforced long-standing gendered tropes about those who engage in commercial sex, thereby limiting the range of potential solutions and outcomes.

##### 4.2.1. Victims

Policy narratives identify “victims and villains”, and in Dear John, the victims were girls and young women at risk for CSE. But unlike many PICs discussed above, Dear John did not feature these victims explicitly, nor did it use the typically gendered images of them that scholars have previously identified, such as the “helpless and witless” girl who lacks agency (Cojucaru 2015, p. 184). Instead, when viewed from an interpretive perspective, the campaign uses symbolic images to allude to girls’ and young women’s risk for CSE. The youngest potential victim can be interpreted as appearing in Figure 3, as a female baby. She is especially vulnerable and in need of protection: as the ads imply, one day a predatory man may capture her if his demand for sexual services continues. The baby thus can be read as symbolizing hope for the future, and what may be lost (e.g., innocence) if she is commercially sexually exploited. In the other ads, young women at risk for CSE are not shown but instead alluded to in the text of Figure 2, as girls old enough to play team sports. Here the coach is telling men that the girls on his team “stay in school” and grow up to become “strong women.” Potential CSE victims’ gender is only ambiguous in Figure 1, where the mayor refers only to “kids”, which can be read as establishing that the mayor wants to protect all minors.

At first glance, Dear John’s focus on girls and young women is understandable: even though there has never been a comprehensive analysis of the sex industry, by most estimates, the majority of persons who sell sex are female. Yet a closer examination indicates the knowledge gaps and political contestations and calculations that underlie many policy narratives. As Nina Hickson stated, Dear John focused on girls and young women because “this is mostly what we saw in the courts” (Interview, 6 January 2014), an observation that was supported further by the findings of *Hidden in Plain View*. Yet by emphasizing girls and young women’s vulnerability, Dear John essentially ignored that boys and queer and gender non-conforming youth engage in sex work *and* may experience harm in the process (Marcus et al. 2014; Ditmore et al. 2012; Showden and Majic 2018) When I raised this fact with Davis and Franklin, they each explained that they did not know as much about this in 2005, when they were developing the campaign (Interviews, Stephanie Davis, 11 January 2014 & Shirley Franklin, 9 January 2014). However, As Shirley Franklin explained, they did try to ensure the campaign encompassed children of all genders, explaining that “the primary information we had about victims at the time were about young women. But in my press conferences I included the impact [of commercial sex] on young males and females. I did not discuss transgender youth, but terms we used covered all youth” (Interview, 9 January 2014).

Despite these knowledge gaps and best efforts to acknowledge youth of all genders, Dear John referred to girls and young women, offering particularly gendered characterizations of them in the process. For one, the campaign emphasized their diminutive femininity by stating that girls and young women are taken advantage of (Figure 3), thrown out and hurt (Figure 1), and used (Figure 2). This characterization is understandable to an extent: under the TVPA, any minor who trades sex is by definition a trafficking victim, and few would argue that it is morally acceptable to lure and trap young women into prostitution (or any type of labor). Yet in characterizing girls and

young women who trade sex this way, these ads offer a stigmatizing, gendered portrayal of them only as victims who have been used and discarded, and who never learned (or could learn) how to be strong.

And second, the campaign also reinforced gendered notions of active male and passive female sexuality. Here, as Stephanie Davis, the campaign's lead creator, explained, "Boys don't have pimps, they do survival sex, they are in gangs. Girls are lured in, groomed, broken, cultivated, and raped before they are turned out. It is different" (Interview, Stephanie Davis, 11 January 2014). This statement indicates that boys and young men have (or will develop) sexual agency, while girls and young women lack this and thus are at higher risk for coercion and harm in the sex industry. Indeed, research indicates that when young people of all genders enter the sex trades, they often make this choice under constrained circumstances (Showden and Majic 2018). However, with Davis's more starkly gendered notion of sexual agency in mind, Dear John implied that when boys and young men trade sex, they are making sexual *choices* (including to trade sex), whereas girls and young women do not make these choices on their own, without external coercion or force.

Yet even as Dear John infers that girls and young women are, by nature, diminutive and sexually passive, its ads also indicate that the community wants more for this population—to be "strong women" and to "have opportunities, like an education". In so doing, the campaign ads state what a "good girl"—and, by extension, a good citizen—should be like: a leader, athletic, educated, and family-oriented. While there is certainly nothing wrong with these characterizations of and aspirations for girls and young women, where do they leave those who have different goals and experiences and make different choices, particularly regarding their engagement in commercial sex? Dear John arguably implies that regardless of their circumstances, they are in some way damaged or inadequate: by selling sex, these girls and young women are "hurt" (Figure 1), without "hope" (Figure 2) and "alone" (Figure 3). In short, their "goodness" is not theirs to define or determine, but dependent on their sexual (and other) interactions with men.

But while Dear John offers highly gendered portrayals of girls and young women in the sex trades, the campaign is more ambiguous in its presentation of their race. The campaign's supporters believed African American girls and young women faced the highest risk for CSE in Atlanta: they appeared most frequently in juvenile court (and thus to arresting officers) and in *Hidden in Plain View*. Yet this population was not featured visually or verbally in Dear John: the text only mentions "girls" (without reference to race, which lends itself to a presumption that victims are white), and the only images of people of color in the ads are of the Mayor, the baby's mother, and the baby.

By not providing explicitly racial representations of victims, Dear John avoids the innocent white girl-victim trope, which the scholars noted above argue is common in many anti-trafficking awareness campaigns. Furthermore, this racial ambiguity is politically expedient in a city like Atlanta, with its long history of racism: featuring and focusing on girls and young women of color in a PIC run by the Mayor's office would open the city's first female African American Mayor to accusations that she favored a particular group, while also risking stereotyping, narrowing its focus, and limiting the campaign's appeal. As a result, one could argue that Dear John emphasized to the public that *all* girls and young women are vulnerable, regardless of race.

Conversely, the campaign's failure to indicate the victims' race (with the exception of the baby) also renders girls of color invisible and may, potentially, further their marginalization. In effect, the victims' racial "absence" ensures that Dear John has the same discursive effect as many of the PICs critiqued above: it fosters social constructions of girls and young women of color as silent victims who are unable to articulate their own interests and therefore must be rescued. Yet at the same time, the campaign's use of race-less victims also does little to counter pervasively entrenched stereotypes that girls of color—and African American girls in particular—are more sexually mature, agentic, and, criminally responsible than white girls, and therefore need less care and protection (Epstein et al. 2017; Ocen 2015).



#### 4.2.2. Villains

If Dear John's narrative indicates that girls and young women are the most common victims, who are the villains? Since "The substantive focus of the campaign was on the buyers of sex and reducing demand" (Edelman & Associates 2008, p. 3), the villains are presumably men, as indicated by Dear John's direct and consequential text in the form of a "Dear John" letter. Yet Dear John did not use the gendered and racialized imagery and language to describe these men that scholars have observed in other campaigns, such as criminal African Americans (Bernstein 2010), "brutal Eastern Europeans", or "rapacious Africans" (Doezema 2010, p. 1). In fact, men who purchase sex are not physically visible in Dear John. Instead, respectable and archetypal members of the community—the Mayor, a coach, and a mother—are symbolically sending such letters to men who may purchase sex, telling them that they have "moved on" from their behavior; they will no longer accept or tolerate it. As Nina Hickson explained, this focus on men was meant to "promote the message that men who bought kids would not be supported; they needed to be accounted for and put out there—shamed" (Interview, 6 January 2014).

On the one hand, this more subtle and symbolic representation of men helps Dear John avoid risks of racial stereotyping and narrowing the campaign's appeal. According to state arrest statistics, the majority of men arrested for the activities Dear John targets (such as "pimping a person under 18 years of age" (Georgia Statute 16-6-11)) are African American,<sup>9</sup> but this does not mean that all men who engage in these activities (arrested or not) necessarily fall within this racial category. Dear John thus can be read as the appealing to *all men* by naming and condemning their actions, as opposed to featuring them visually. Phrases in the ads such as "you have been abusing our kids", "you use kids for your own sexual sport", and "you take advantage of kids" stress instead that the men's *predatory nature* harms girls and young women.

But on the other hand, Dear John's representation of and emphasis on individual men's demand for sex from girls and young women reinforces the notion that men only want to purchase sex from this population, which ignores that men also purchase sex (arguably more often) from adult women *and* men. This individualistic focus also deemphasizes other causal factors that may increase young people's (and adults') vulnerabilities to and within commercial sex. Engagement in the sex trades is a complex phenomenon: a growing body of research (e.g., Marcus et al. 2014; Showden and Majic 2018) indicates that few young people (male or female) are actually kidnapped or bribed by individual purchasers and facilitators. Instead, they may have left unstable/abusive homes, and their need for food, clothing, shelter, and other resources may leave them with few options beyond exchanging sex to meet these basic needs. In other cases, they may decide to trade sex in order to explore their sexuality (Raible 2011). Altogether, while individual men may facilitate commercial sex, this is often not the only factor. However, Dear John's failure to emphasize these other factors also reflected the political contests and calculations that informed its development. After all, as Stephanie Davis explained here, "the issue behind trafficking is poverty, etc., and [no one] will say this is a priority" (Interview, 11 January 2014). With this reality in mind, Dear John reflected a more carceral approach that emphasized punishing individual men instead of highlighting the need for services and programs to reduce child poverty.

#### 4.2.3. Solutions

In Dear John's narrative, what, then, are the solutions? The PIC indicates that a "zero tolerance" approach is essential for changing individual men's behavior and ending their demand for commercial sex. To convey this zero tolerance message, the ads mobilize statements such as "It's over John, no more", "The game's over. No more", and (in large caps text) "Not in my city", "Not on my team", and "Not in my neighborhood." Although the ads do not state the specific consequences of men's non-compliance, the penalty is presumably harsh, as these messages are coming from authority figures in the community.

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<sup>9</sup> Georgia Arrest statistics (see note 7).

Namely, in Figure 1 and in the video ad, the image of the mayor could be read as symbolizing zero tolerance on the part of the local government. Here Mayor Franklin is dressed officially, with a corsage on her lapel and the Atlanta skyline in the background. She is looking into the camera, directly addressing purchasers with mild disgust (conveyed by her grim facial expression); her derisive tone implies that she knows what they are up to and that she will not tolerate it. For supporters of the campaign, this particular image was powerful because she was “the first African American woman to lead a major city in the US” and, by extension, to “expend political capital on this issue” (Shively et al. 2010, pp. 6–39). As Franklin herself explained here, “As the first woman mayor, I needed address these issues” (Interview, 9 January 2014). By presenting herself, in the ads, as a disapproving authority figure, she makes it clear to the public that since she will not tolerate men’s involvement in prostitution and the CSE of young women, other city authorities will not do so either.

Second, in Figure 2, a white male coach can be read as symbolizing upstanding citizens who will not tolerate CSE of girls and young women. The image shows the coach leaning forward on a desk in what appears to be an athletic supply room. He is glaring over his glasses to express his displeasure with the purchasers, and his stern facial expression and domineering bodily posture signals that a respectable people like him would not purchase sexual services from a young girl, nor will he tolerate if other men (“like him”) do so. In effect, this image shows that he is watching his peers and will not permit their propositioning of girls and young women.

While few would agree that any person should be exploited for commercial sex or otherwise, Dear John’s individually-oriented “zero tolerance” solution is also limited in some key ways. First, visually, it reinforces the notion of the white male savior, which is a common trope in these PICs (Baker 2014). This is apparent in Figure 2, where the white male coach is positioned authoritatively in the ad—leaning forward and glaring over his glasses—to send a stern message to the audience. While the accompanying text tells viewers that men who purchase sex deny girls and young women opportunities in life, it also emphasizes that through the coach’s guidance, girls and young women can become strong; in fact, their futures seem to depend on their contact with older white men.

And second, Dear John’s “zero tolerance” message implicitly supports criminalization approaches to address the CSE of minors, while indicating the political–economic challenges of social service provision, particularly at the municipal level. To illustrate: Dear John was generated from the Mayor’s Office, which could comfortably oppose the demand for prostitution, but was also unlikely to (a) advocate for decriminalizing prostitution, which would prevent youth from being arrested, even when they are victims, and (b) admit (as Davis noted above) that it has not done enough to address how more structural factors such as poverty and homelessness may lead many youth to engage in the sex trades. These municipal government constraints were also evident in the instance of Angela’s House, which was opened to provide safe housing and services for victims. This facility closed in 2011 for varied reasons, after serving 125 sexually exploited girls,<sup>10</sup> thereby indicating the lack of political will and resources to pursue non-criminalizing approaches to the CSE of girls and young women.

#### 4.2.4. Outcomes

What impact did Dear John’s narrative have on public behavior and policy? According to Abt Associates, the campaign was not meant “to directly impact the behavior of actual or potential purchasers, although it was hoped that the messages would resonate with them” (Shively et al. 2012, p. 4). Yet that degree of resonance is hard to determine due to the campaign’s length and lack of formal evaluation. As Davis explained (Interview, 11 January 2014), the campaign was linked to then Mayor Franklin, and so it ended with her mayoral term. As Shirley Franklin added here, Dear John

<sup>10</sup> Mariano (2012) attributed the closure to a lack of need, funds, and a change in management, whereas a representative from YouthSpark claimed in our interview (9 January 2014) that it closed because it was purchased by and amalgamated with Wellspring, another youth service provider in the area.

ended “because it was an awareness campaign, not a programmatic campaign, so it was not intended to be ongoing” (Interview, 9 January 2014). And representatives from the current Mayor Kasim Reed’s office told me that while they agreed with the Dear John campaign in principle, they held that they would not continue it since it was “Mayor Franklin’s project” (Interview, Melissa Mullinax and Kristin Canvan Wilson, 9 January 2012). Given this—and the fact that the campaign received awards and accolades—there was seemingly little incentive to study Dear John’s impact on individual behavior. And so, to date, Dear John’s “impact on demand for prostitution or sex trafficking is unknown” (Shively et al. 2012, p. 4). However, Shively et al. do note some of its short-comings, namely that it “was not cross-cultural”—it was only produced in English, and its message may not have resonated with those who do not understand the cultural reference to a “Dear John” letter (Shively et al. 2010, pp. 6–40). Therefore, even as the campaign was supposed to convey a “new” policy narrative about prostitution, this did not reach everyone, and there is no evidence that it reduced the demand for commercial sex.

However, the campaign’s developers and supporters argued that Dear John *did* achieve another goal: while it may not have changed individual behavior, it made the CSE of girls and young women an issue of public concern. In fact, Nina Hickson (Interview, 6 January 2014), Stephanie Davis (Interview, 11 January 2014) and Shirley Franklin (Interview, 9 January 2014) all expressed doubts that the campaign reduced the demand for commercial sex; however, they believed that it brought more public and political attention to the issue. As Shirley Franklin explained, “Dear John raised awareness and increased the discussion among those in the criminal justice/law enforcement field about things they could do. We put stake in the ground establishing that this was an area of interest for the city’s leadership” (Interview, 9 January 2014). Various stakeholders beyond Hickson, Franklin, and Davis also believed Dear John was effective. As a representative from the Atlanta District Attorney’s office stated, “The Dear John program got the police to recognize this was a crime and the police should not ignore it and should not be partners with pimps” (Interview, 7 January 2014). And in another example, a representative from YouthSpark, which was founded as the nonprofit arm of the Atlanta juvenile court to address cases with young people in the sex industry, told me that the campaign “gave the issue visibility. [Dear John] didn’t just focus on victims but held accountable those who perpetuate the problem” (Interview, YouthSpark Official: 9 January 2014). Consequently, a number of advocacy, law, and policy initiatives have emerged in Dear John’s wake to address the “demand” side of prostitution. In just some examples, Georgia’s Not Buying It, a coalition of law enforcement and community groups, was formed to raise awareness about youth in the sex industry and encourage men to take a “pledge” against soliciting women for sex. As well, the Georgia Care Connection was established to serve girls and young women who have been victims of (sex) trafficking, the Fulton County DA is now more willing to prosecute purchasers and facilitators, and the police now receive training about identifying and helping minors in the sex industry (Shively et al. 2010). And in 2010 Georgia enhanced its prostitution and trafficking laws to increase penalties against persons who purchase and or profit from the CSE of minors.

## 5. Conclusions

Public information campaigns deploy policy narratives to shape public attitudes and policy preferences. In Atlanta, the Dear John campaign conveyed a “male demand” narrative, and this paper has argued that it did this through symbolic images and direct and consequential text that discursively reinforced particularly gendered notions of persons engaged in commercial sex, while minimizing the structural factors that increase vulnerabilities therein. As the nation’s longest running and most highly acclaimed anti-demand PIC, Dear John thus offers important lessons to those concerned with sex work-related issues and social and policy change.

First, Dear John provides an important lesson about how “new” policies may actually re-inscribe older and arguably less comprehensive approaches to social problems. In the US, prostitution-related laws and policies have remained fairly static over time: criminalization is the order of the day, and it has been applied to women more than men. But in recent years, as this paper has documented, a male demand narrative has emerged and influenced policies that target *men*, of which the Dear John PIC

provides a high profile local example. But while Dear John's focus on male demand seemed like a relatively new idea, in practice it reinforced very *traditional* ideational constructions of persons who engage in sex work and the appropriate policy solutions. Here, even though the campaign avoided the typically gendered and racialized imagery that scholars have identified in these campaigns, it still reinforced predator–victim tropes. Moreover, by sending these men a “Dear John” letter, the campaign emphasized zero-tolerance for their actions, which implies support for an *old* policy approach (criminalization). As a result, Dear John emphasized that exploitation in the sex industry is a function of “greedy traffickers, or unethical consumers”, which effectively “draws a circle” around exploitation in the sex industry as a distinct and unique problem that is separate from other related policy issues (Baker 2015, p. 14). As a result, it emphasized prosecuting and punishing purchasers of sex over addressing structural issues such as poverty and homelessness.

Second, Dear John indicates PICs' limits and possibilities for raising awareness about complex social problems such as young people's engagement in commercial sex. One key limit is knowledge: given sex work's stigma and potential criminal penalties, persons who trade sex (of all ages) are difficult to access via traditional social science research methods; as a result, researchers have yet to establish a baseline prevalence of this activity and characterization of its participants (Weitzer 2015). A second key limit are a PIC's sponsors' political concerns. Although a PIC is not the sole source of public information and/or impetus for policy change, it reflects certain issue positions; its sponsors therefore have various stakes in the narrative it conveys about an issue's subjects, causes, and solutions. For example, government sponsors may want to promote a particular characterization of an issue in order to appeal to their constituents.

These knowledge limitations and political concerns are apparent in Dear John. The campaign's supporters and creators were advocates concerned with issues related to women, children, and juvenile justice, and the mayor's office sponsored it. Since their knowledge about the “victims and villains” came mainly from court observations, Dear John emphasized girls' and young women's vulnerability, but as a result, it minimized that of boys, queer, and transgender youth.

In stating all of this, I am not minimizing the fact that young people—and girls and young women in particular—are often harmed by men in the sex industry, nor am I denying that these men should be punished. Instead, I will close by suggesting that if policymakers are going to rely, in part, on PICs to raise awareness regarding issues of harm and vulnerability in the sex trades, they could avoid the well-documented pitfalls of Dear John (and other PICs). To this end, they may consider engaging the impacted constituency in the PIC's development, as some organizations have done. For example, the San Francisco-based St James Infirmary, the world's only occupational health and safety clinic run by and for sex workers, sought to raise awareness about the harms sex workers face through a PIC. Titled “Someone You Know Is a Sex Worker”, it featured ads on buses and posters for general distribution. Instead of focusing on male demand as sex workers' primary source of vulnerability (as Dear John did), this PIC addressed how the *stigmatization of sex work* often forces sex workers to hide their activities from others. Featuring photos of diverse individuals and text with quotes stating, for example, “Sex workers go to work, come home, take care of their children—just like everyone else does”, it provided “a very visible message that would upend the stereotypes of sex workers as desperate drug addicts lurking in the shadows... [and] provoke the general public to reconsider who among them might be a sex worker, and to broaden the definition of who a sex worker is” (Schreiber 2015, p. 255).

Of course, the Atlanta mayor's office is not the St James Infirmary: any organization (government or otherwise) that is focused on “ending demand” for prostitution would not likely include sex worker rights activists in developing a related PIC, nor would many sex workers be interested in supporting and informing this process. However, if the PIC's goal is to raise awareness about the harms faced by persons who trade sex, no matter their age or gender, engaging sex worker rights groups in the development process may be useful. These groups could ensure that the PIC addresses how broader issues of sexual choice, poverty, and criminalization—and not simply predatory men—shapes engagement and vulnerability in the sex trades. Certainly, sex worker-rights groups in the U.S. do not have the same, broad public appeal and support that coaches, moms, and

mayors do, but given the proliferation of sex work/trafficking-related PICs, policymakers would benefit from incorporating their voices to promote positive, progressive social change.

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