

Storytelling & moral panic

Christian fundamentalism in Germany is increasing rapidly – not only in Germany

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“Was that really a good idea?”

As I listen to Tobias Ginsburg talk about his book *Die letzten Männer des Westen* (Ginsburg, 2021), I chew on this question.

In autumn 2024, I am on a conference on far-right extremism organized by the Doctoral College for Intersectionality Studies at the University of Bayreuth, and I ask myself: “What am I doing here?” Neither the topic of Christian fundamentalism, which I brought with me, nor my occupation as a sex worker ‘qualify’ me particularly for this. At least that’s what I have been told many times before.

Anyone reading this text will hardly know the research collective *FundiWatch* (*FundiWatch*, 2025a), and me even less. *FundiWatch* investigates Christian fundamentalism in German-speaking countries. We are currently less than a handful of people. We assume that this will change over the coming months. Our core topic Christian fundamentalism is becoming too relevant for more and more people, it becomes clear every day that more and more people are being negatively affected by Christian fundamentalism – often without really being able to understand *what* is going on.

In matters of gender, sexual and reproductive rights, the Trump administration and numerous other authoritarian regimes globally are creating startling realities at a rapid pace. There are numerous intersecting topics in the global anti-gender movement, these topics are ‘discussed’ in a way I refer to as ‘culture war.’ Culture war topics are being received in middle-class to far-right circles and serve deeply

felt and culturalized resentment towards queer, trans¹ persons and sex workers. They formulate reactionary ideas of a binary, heteronormative and heterosexual understanding of gender and corresponding role models. Christian fundamentalism has long been a central player in the fields of culture war. It fulfils its role through (ultra-)conservative sexual morals and purity culture² and has a huge reach (Jetter, 2023), especially among younger people, through contemporary pop cultural, digital phenomena such as #tradwife or #womansphere (Silman, 2025). More recently, the alliances between “the” far right and “Christian fundamentalism” have become more visible, for example in elaborately staged and streamed baptisms of central figures of the Alt-right (LIEBEZURBEL, 2024) or at events such as the “1000 Crosses March” (firm, 2024) or the “March for Life” (Huebner & Ringel, 2024), at which more and more members of the German far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which has been confirmed as ‘right-wing extremist’ by a report of the *Office for the Protection of the Constitution* (Tagesschau, 2025), can be seen in addition to the usual faces – such as Beatrix von Storch or Maximilian Krah. All of these topics have one thing in common: they play an important role in the ongoing culture war, which is alarmingly well received in middle-class milieus (Zick, Küppers & Mokros, 2023).

Culture war and moral panic

The modern culture war usually concerns highly personal decisions such as abortion, gender and sexual self-determination, migration, sex work, assisted suicide, surrogacy, or ritual violence and ‘porn addiction.’ It often builds on an existing discrimination or taboo and uses language and messages of resentment and hatred, disinformation to stir up moral panic.³

Before I go into the example in more detail, I would like to return briefly to myself and my doubts. As a non-binary sex worker, I often perceive myself as ‘foreign’ or ‘not belonging,’ this was also the case at the conference from which this anthology emerges. However, this is not due to my subjective feeling, but is based on experiences of exclusion, discrimination and stigma. At *FundiWatch* (and elsewhere), I analyse far-right, (ultra-)conservative and Christian fundamentalist culture war topics. And that often causes irritation, because moral panics about the kind of work

1 Trans, inter, asexual and non-binary people.

2 Purity culture: A Christian fundamentalist concept of morality that propagates chastity outside of marriage. This also includes masturbation and the rejection of behavior that is considered sexually deviant.

3 The term moral panic goes back to the sociologist Stanley Cohen. Cohen observed a central role of the media in the emergence and promotion of moral panics (Citcher, 2017).

I do (sex work) and people like me (sex workers) imply that my very presence can trigger arguments. My doubts kick in particularly hard today among all the smart and well-established conference participants from all over Europe with professional backgrounds in journalism, social work, ethnology or political science. But I know exactly what I'm talking about.

Not everyone immediately understands the logical connection between far-right extremism, Christian fundamentalism and sexworkphobia⁴ (Rebelde, 2023), so let me explain: Me and my colleagues are directly affected by Christian fundamentalist activities and their breathtaking expansion in social work, as well as in politics and the media. They are becoming an increasing threat to us. At the same time, these resentments against sex workers are based on the discriminatory assumption of the inequality of sex workers and the assertion that it is 'legitimate' to save us, convert us and question our existence. Ideologies of inequality are the fundament for every far-right movement.

In times of loud calls for more bans or even the 'abolition' of sex work, or when questionable practices such as healing or liberation prayers, like Sozo (Bethelsozo, 2025; FundiWatch, 2025b), the use of aromatherapy⁵ and even exorcism of demons (Cara-SH, 2024)⁶ are part of the practices in Christian fundamentalist networks, there is a huge gaping void: The public, political or even journalistic lack of interest in who is 'saving' whom, why and by what means, and whether this is a human rights-based approach.

As a result, Christian fundamentalist projects are rapidly gaining ground in German-speaking countries. This is enthusiastically welcomed in middle-class women's rights and 'gender-critical' circles, because these groups agree that a 'world without prostitution' must be a better world. There is a yawning lack of interest in what happens in the name of charity when Christian fundamentalist projects rescue 'prostitutes.' A number of such projects are already admitted to protestant welfare organizations ("Diakonien", "diakonische Werke") and one of them, Neustart e.V., has actually been appointed to become a pilot project by the federal state of Germany (BMFSFJ, 2025), while my colleagues disappear into private shelters and/or are deported if they fail to achieve the desired 'exit' from prostitution. Instead of pursuing the question why sex workers are considered 'unequal' or sinners and/or a threat to a 'decent, moral, normal' society, they are thrown to the wolves, i.e. to the rescue industry of Christian fundamentalism and its gender- and prostitution-critical friends (LFS, 2025).

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- 4 Sexworkphobia refers to the experience of discrimination that sex workers experience because they are sex workers.
 - 5 About the cooperation between Mission Freedom and the aromatic oil manufacturer doTERRA see doTERRA (2025).
 - 6 The counselling center Cara-SH has documented a case; see Cara-SH (2024).

“We care” – in German – is a central slogan of the *Salvation Army* in Germany (Heilsarmee, 2025a). The fact that they “care” spares mainstream society a lot: dealing with structural sexism, trans misogyny, classism and racism, for example, not to mention sexworkphobia. The aforementioned associations and institutions fall back on clichés and resentment against sex workers deeply rooted in mainstream society (Rebelde, 2025). In this way, underlying questions are avoided, such as:

- How can we achieve equality of sex workers?
- How can sex workers benefit from human rights and labour rights?

Back to the subject of the conference: Far-right extremism.

What ideologies do Christian fundamentalists, (ultra-)conservatives and far-right-wingers share?

So: What does the devaluation of sex workers have in common with far-right ideologies?

The construction of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ or ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ is a central criterion for ideologies of inequality, which can be found in authoritarian to far-right concepts. *Germany – but normal* (AfD, 2021) – was the translated title of the AfD’s 2021 election manifesto. The party believes that anything that varies from this constructed ‘normal’ should be reduced or, ideally, no longer take any place at all, such as ‘multiculturalism’ or sexual and gender self-determination apart from ‘biological sex.’ In recent years, Pride Walks (Autor*innenkollektiv Feministische Intervention, 2025) have become a key topic for campaigns and mobilization of far-right marches attacking ‘gender ideology. Hatred and rejection of a small social group is expressed more aggressively and more loudly every year and is accompanied by a massive increase in violence (BKA, 2024). Alarming, the middle-class white women’s movement⁷ also participates in these attacks on trans and queer people. Another campaign theme of this women’s movement was and is the fight against sex work and sex workers for a ‘world without prostitution’ (Emma Magazine, 2013).

Sexworkphobia is another culture war topic, where far-right attitudes and conservative networks and actors overlap. The approval to anti-sex work statements as well as the restriction of sexual and reproductive self-determination enables broad alliances that run from the far-right to the middle-class women’s movement and include Christian fundamentalism (Rebelde, 2023 & 2025).

7 An incomplete overview of the more radicalized spectrum of gender-critical actors in the women’s movement can be found here: LFS (2025).

Note: No, FundiWatch does not consist of sex workers only, so far there is only me with this background in our research collective. And yet the reality of sexworkphobia was the starting point for FundiWatch. One milestone was a research project on the *Mission Freedom* association, it can be found on our homepage (Pöhl, 2025).

The extent to which these developments have already progressed makes my hair stand on end: There is hardly any other socially controversial topic where networks, strategies and talking-points of Christian fundamentalism have been able to establish and institutionalize themselves so openly and unchallenged. The 'world without prostitution' or the 'fight against human trafficking,' as Christian fundamentalists call their anti-sex work activities, is by no means their core issue, not even a favourite one. But it is for sure a field of campaigning, where it was easy for them to gain a foothold.

This is illustrated by the following anecdote experienced by another member of *FundiWatch*: At a Christian fundamentalist and sexworkphobic conference, a 'social ethicist' and professor answered the following question '*How can we achieve anything politically in postmodern Berlin?*'

The answer was: Christians could, after all, interpret terms such as 'gender equality.' She gave an example: It is a scandal, she said, that 'misgendering' is a punishable offense, but the actual biggest 'gender violation' itself remains unpunished. In the terminology code of the event, she was referring to sex work as gender-specific violence. She called for the fight of gender equality to be instrumentalized – even though her own thinking is shaped by a strictly binary, 'biological' understanding of gender. Hijacking the term, however, allows to attack sex work effectively and oppose 'postmodern Berlin.' Those present understood and applauded thunderously.

The fight against 'prostitution' was and is both: an ongoing campaign and a laboratory for testing communication strategies, slogans and alliances. The experience from over 150 years is evaluated and updated in real-time. To show this let's take a closer look at the example of the *Salvation Army*.

The *Salvation Army* and 'prostitution'

The *Salvation Army* was founded in 1865 by the pastor couple William and Catherine Booth in London. From the very beginning, the *Salvation Army* was characterized by combining biblical preaching and evangelisation with charitable activities aimed particularly at vulnerable groups (Heilsarmee, 2025a). For a long time, the *Salvation Army's* motto was: *soup, soap, salvation* (Bracegirdle, 2021). Sex workers have been and still are one of the *Salvation Army's* preferred target groups. In my hometown Hamburg, the *Salvation Army* is located directly on the Reeperbahn party mile, which for many is synonymous with sex work. But the *Salvation Army* (at least in Europe) would

not use the term ‘sex work’ but refer to ‘prostitution.’ In Amsterdam, in a similar neighborhood, the *Salvation Army* even offers a tourist walk through the Red-Light District: For them ‘prostitution’ is inextricably linked to ‘modern slavery’ and cannot be separated from human trafficking (Heilsarmee, 2025b). This is a key belief in this free church. Henny Tinga from the *Salvation Army Amsterdam* states in the aforementioned Red-Light District audio walk:

“Everywhere where there is prostitution there is human trafficking and forced prostitution. (...)” (Amsterdam Red Light District, 2025)

Another recent example from 2024: The *World Evangelical Alliance* and the *Salvation Army Canada* published a joint statement. It reads:

“The World Evangelical Alliance together with our member, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC), and the Salvation Army call on States to recognize prostitution with its connected variations as a system of exploitation and violence, and to adopt an abolitionist legal framework.” (WEA, 2024)

This statement was prompted by a corresponding declaration by UN Special Rapporteur Reem Alsalem, which was rejected by sex workers worldwide (ESWA, 2024).

The Salvation Army’s *positional statement* from 2015 provides evidence for the justification of this opinion:

“The Salvation Army does not support treating prostitution as normative or acceptable practice, or as a socially or morally legitimate career choice. We recognize the negative consequences of prostitution on people and society, including personal degradation, exploitation, human trafficking and damage to psychological and physical health. (...) The Salvation Army identifies a need to continually combat demand, develop sufficient support for people desiring to exit sex work, provide community education and challenge behaviors that devalue people through sexual exploitation.” (Heilsarmee, 2025c; highlights by the author)

A façade of charity and commitment hides moral codes and sexual ethical behavioural requirements that construct sex workers as a threat scenario, sinful and objects of rescue. The former attributions tend to be implicit, while the latter, salvation, is the core of the self-marketing and self-narration of Christian fundamentalist players in particular. The extent to which the moral basis of such practices is obscured and used by opponents to prostitution explains the following 140 years old historical excursus, which refers to a well-known literary classic:

What connects *Eliza Doolittle* from *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady* to the *Salvation Army* and the strategy of moral panic?

The musical *My Fair Lady* is based on the novel *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw. This fact might be familiar to some, at least when I was at school, both the musical and the novel were part of the curriculum. The following, on the other hand, is probably new to most people:

Shaw was inspired to write *Pygmalion* by the 'Eliza Armstrong case' (Stead, 1885) which took place in London at the end of the 19th century. This case is part of media history as one of the earliest examples of scandal journalism (Hattersley, 1999). William T. Stead wrote the series of articles *The Maiden Tribune to Modern Babylon* for the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885. Stead was a dazzling figure, a pioneer of scandal journalism, a convicted felon and a skilful self-promoter. His death on the *Titanic* - according to legend with a book in his hand in the saloon of the sinking ship (Sydney Robinson, 2012) - fits seamlessly into his biography. However, it is not the person William Stead that is relevant for our context, but the background to his very successful and widely read *The Maiden Tribune to Modern Babylon* on the 'modern virgin sacrifice.' This would not be the case without the initiative of the women's rights activist Josephine Butler and the active 'help' of the *Salvation Army* ... I have already reconstructed this case for my book on sexworkphobia:

"Stead's *The Maiden Tribune to Modern Babylon* (...) describes in lurid detail the trafficking of English 'virgins' into continental brothels, citing alleged examples. One of these examples - the case of Lily / Eliza Armstrong - turned out in retrospect to be Stead's journalistic stunt. Stead and accomplices 'bought' and abducted a thirteen-year-old girl and were later convicted for it. (...) Florence Booth, the daughter-in-law of *Salvation Army* founders William and Catherine Booth, ran the home for 'fallen women'⁸ in Whitechapel, a London district known for its extreme poverty and associated problems, from 1884 on. Her husband, Bramwell Booth, acknowledged Josephine Butler's role in the Eliza Armstrong case in his memoirs, and there are numerous other reconstructions of the case. Bramwell Booth was co-defendant in the later trial but was ultimately not convicted as an accomplice of Stead and Rebecca Jarrett (a former brothel madam who had converted to the *Salvation Army* shortly before the staged abduction). The *Salvation Army* also helped sell the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The newspaper ran out of paper several times during printing, so immense was the demand. It has been reconstructed that it was probably Florence Booth who recruited Rebecca Jarrett for the abduction of Eliza and other contacts with suspected people from the milieu. The fact that the Eliza case was staged did not detract from the effectiveness of Stead's article. Stead even used his prison sentence, which he served as a first-class prisoner,

8 Such asylums for 'fallen women' existed in many places.

for self-promotion by continuing to publish from prison and later processing his imprisonment into reports." (Rebelde, 2025, p. 123)

Stead's 'Eliza case' was therefore both a stunt and an act of violence. Based on the original idea by Josephine Butler and with the help of the *Salvation Army*, Stead and his accomplices abducted a thirteen-year-old girl to France, for which they had to stand trial, and – partially – were convicted. Stead wanted to substantiate his scandalizing account of the trafficking of girls and women by providing 'evidence.' Since it was not possible to provide this 'evidence' by other means, he and his accomplices resorted to this stunt. The *Salvation Army* abused its influence over a member of its religious community (Rebecca Jarrett) and its access to a vulnerable population group bought with 'soup and soap.'

Josephine Butler later justified the entire process, i.e. the stunt and the crime, in the medium of the *Salvation Army* (Salvation Army UK, 2025). 2016, the author Cathy LeFeuvre, herself a member of the *Salvation Army*, described the Eliza Armstrong case as "uncomfortable", but: "Did the ends justify the means? I suppose they did." (Halcrow, 2016)

In fact, both the success of Stead's *The Maiden Tribune to Modern Babylon* and the rampant moral panic about human trafficking helped to foster a change in the law, that Josephine Butler sought at the same time. The law concerned the raising of the age of consent for adolescents and was in itself certainly worthy of approval. However, the way in which vulnerable people were used/tokenized, and the way in which the media and a fused movement of women's rights activists and *Salvation Army* proceeded, is highly open to criticism. The aforementioned Shaw borrowed Eliza Armstrong for his character of Eliza Doolittle, even after it became public that the Eliza case was a journalistic stunt.

How it started and how it's going

The *Salvation Army Germany* is today a member of the association *Gemeinsam gegen Menschenhandel e.V.* (which translates to *Together Against Human Trafficking, short: GGMH*). The chairman, Frank Heinrich, has a past with the *Salvation Army*, before he became a member of the Bundestag for the conservative Christian Democrats in Germany, the CDU/CSU for a while (Bundestag, 2024). Heinrich was on the board of the *Evangelical Alliance Germany (EAD)* until March 2025 (EAD, 2025). Both the GGMH and the EAD are heterogeneous associations of very different, but overall Christian fundamentalist members. GGMH consists of, among others: *Samaritans Purse* (made famous by the evangelist Billy Graham and today under the leadership of his son Franklin), *Mission Freedom*, from the spectrum of *Christ for all Nation (CfAN)*,

SOLWODI, Neustart e.V. alongside the *Salvation Army* and many other free-church, evangelical or charismatic projects. They all have two things in common:

How they talk about sex workers, namely as ‘modern slaves’ and victims. And: What their ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of ‘prostitution’ is, namely ‘rescue,’ as well as the introduction of criminalization of the demand for sexual services (the so-called Nordic model (WEA, 2024).

For this purpose GGMH and also the *Salvation Army* are increasingly involved politically, e.g. in the *European Freedom Network* or on the streets, e.g. in the annually increasing number of *Walks for Freedom* (Walk for Freedom, 2025), which are very similar to the concept of *Marches for Life*.

The connections between GGMH and the *Salvation Army* could not be closer: The *Salvation Army Germany*’s subwebpage on “human trafficking” is adorned with the logo of *Gemeinsam gegen Menschenhandel e.V.* (Heilsarmee, 2025d), without any explanation. Back in 2016, Frank Heinrich and Uwe Heimowski, who was from 2016 -2021 ‘ambassador’ for the Evangelical Alliance Germany in the German parliament and before that employed as assistant of Frank Heinrich, published the richly illustrated and extremely one-sided book (title originally in German, translated by the author): *The repressed scandal. Human Trafficking in Germany*, in which they present their understanding of sex work as ‘modern slavery’ and Europe as a “marketplace of slaves” (Heinrich & Heimowski, 2016, p. 07, translated by the author) in a collection of pictures and stories. Many of the aforementioned members of GGMH have their say there with anecdotal – and that is unverifiable – stories of ‘rescue operations.’

This book once again impressively demonstrates the close relationship between Heinrich and the *Salvation Army* as well as the importance of scandal stories. In the preface, Heinrich makes many disturbing analogies between the enslavement of ‘black people’ (that is “*Schwarze Menschen*”), his choice of words – not mine, and ‘sex slaves’ (“*Sexsklaven*”). Not once in the entire preface the term prostitution or sex work is mentioned, let alone any attempt to differentiate sex work from trafficking for sexual exploitation. The book contains images that very well could be stock photos for sex work as such, citing the usual attributes such as high heels, fishnet stockings and short skirts: A sexist *male* gaze on female bodies, in front of neon advertisements, nocturnal views of streets and poverty. The book suggests: All people in sex work are victims of human trafficking. According to the book published by Heimowski and Heinrich, human trafficking in Germany is the same as ‘prostitution.’ The two are not alone in this view, as the following quote from the preface shows:

“Women’s rights activists such as Alice Schwarzer with her sharp and pointed reporting, or the Catholic nun Lea Ackermann, who has been active for 30 years with her association SOLWODI (...) founded in Kenya. The association ‘Gemeinsam Gegen Menschenhandel e.V.’ (GGMH) was founded as an alliance to network

various initiatives in Germany and Europe and support them in their fight against human trafficking. Each of the members has their own story that led to their commitment. In my case, it is closely linked to the Salvation Army. I worked as an officer in this 'Army of God' for twelve years." (Heinrich & Heimowski, 2016, p. 11, translated by the author)

Heinrich then refers explicitly to Stead's *The Maiden Tribune to Modern Babylon* and to the Eliza Armstrong case and says:

"In the Salvation Army, human trafficking is a key issue. William Booth, the founder, and his son Bramwell had already launched a successful press campaign ('The Maiden Tribute') in 1885 (...) When I was elected to the German Parliament in 2009, I also put the issue at the top of my agenda." (Heinrich & Heimowski, 2016, p. 11, translation and highlights by the author)

Heinrich will keep his word and has poured a great deal of energy into his personal cause. The opposition of sex workers, who do not want more repression and bans, but rights and decriminalization, does not count at all for him.

Approach: The playbook of fundamentalists in 'red-light districts'

The concept is simple, but quite successful.

The first step for this groups is to be present on the streets in a kind of voluntary street missionary work, distributing drinks and pastries free of charge. At this stage, it is already notable that they explicitly use social work terminology, although it is religious missionary work. They refer to it as 'outreach work' (Bundestag, 2025). This often is followed by the establishment of a private 'shelter' or 'shelter house.' Here, the boundaries between an official facility, for example a municipal emergency shelter, and a private, religiously motivated shelter are blurred as much as possible. Both stages are flanked by intensive public relations announcements, social media 'informs' about their activities, Christian media such as *IDEA*, *chrismon*, *Pro+* happily pick up such stories (see *IDEA*, 2024). Locally, the projects are gradually becoming more offensive, ringing the doors of brothels and entering them, not always saying frankly, that they do not belong to an official and approved counselling center. Sex workers report that these people do not always leave the brothel willingly to let the sex workers carry out their work. In the meantime, these projects have usually found like-minded people locally and are involving more and more volunteers in their activities.

As a next step, the projects then try to be admitted to local welfare organizations on the ground. *Mission Freedom* succeeded in doing this in 2013, when *Diakonie*

Hamburg (an important protestant welfare organization) took on the obviously missionary association despite a major scandal – the “Lisa Case” (Pöhl, 2025; Rebelde, 2025). Around the same time, the association *Neustart e.V.* (*Neustart* emerged from *Teen Challenge* and maintains links with *Samaritans Purse* and *Alabaster Jar*, with the latter it shares its premises in Berlin’s Kurfürstenstraße (*Neustart*, 2025b)) was also admitted to the *Diakonische Werk Berlin-Brandenburg*.

Once they have arrived this stage, the projects often initiate processes of positioning on sex work within the welfare associations. The following self-narrative is used for this: This project is performing pioneering work, has recognized the ‘truth’ about ‘prostitution’ and is performing self-sacrificing rescue work on immature victims (*Neustart*, 2025a). Absurdly, all of this takes place in front of a traditional and widely developed landscape of counselling centers for sex workers in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. However, the Christian fundamentalist projects do not see themselves in this accepting and non-patronizing tradition: they even compete locally with the named counselling centers, which work in harm-reduction, professional and accepting ways. The tenor of Christian fundamentalists here is:

The suffering is enormous and only we see the true extent of it and therefore we have the ‘one and only true’ solution.

Counselling centers or peer-to-peer projects are often described by Christian fundamentalists as part of the ‘prostitution system’ or even as ‘pimp lobby’ because they have a more differentiated opinion than ‘prostitution is always violence or the same as human trafficking’ and ‘every person’ in ‘prostitution’ must be ‘saved.’ It is enough to claim ambivalence and ambiguity when considering the complex of sex work and human trafficking to be marked and attacked as an enemy by these projects. In order to support their own position they present, very drastic and often not verifiable and/or in retrospect inaccurate cases (see Pöhl, 2025). In hearings with politicians, these descriptions/stories often take up more time than fact-based arguments. An opinion is elevated to a fact and, even more so, to be the ‘only’ valid ‘truth.’ However, often this instrumentalizes fears, as fears and worries play a central role in moral panics.

Once the project has been institutionalized in (mostly religious) welfare associations, the way is clear for accreditation in the public aid system, as was recently the case with *SeeNest* (see Pöhl, 2025).

The history of *Neustart e.V.*’s ‘exit and shelter apartment’ also perfectly fits into this strategy. *Neustart* was appointed to become a federal pilot project, bypassing the official call, only to be seamlessly funded by the Berlin Senate after the end of the federal pilot project by the Berlin Senate. While drastic cuts are being announced everywhere else, including the aforementioned counselling centers, the justification for this is: ‘Political will!’

Stoking moral panic continues to be an extremely popular and effective method in the Christian fundamentalist scene. To this end, high, but purely estimated fig-

ures are used and anecdotal evidence is disseminated in the storytelling of individual biographies. Josephine Butler already wanted to enforce a certain law⁹ in 1885 when she decided to collaborate with William Stead; today, the networks still engage in lawfare, laws containing more repressions on sex worker, or even the ‘abolition’ of ‘prostitution.’ The term lawfare consists of the words “law” and “warfare” and refers inter alia to the use of legal means against political opponents (Kittrrie, 2016). In the case of sex work, reproductive and sexual self-determination, it also refers to the strategy of working politically towards more restrictive laws or ‘bans.’ An example of a successful lawfare strategy is the campaign of *Alliance Defending Freedom* (ADF) against the US Supreme Court ruling *Roe v. Wade*.

This is not a phenomenon limited to sex work but can also be seen in the ADF’s campaigns in the USA to abolish the right of abortion or in the aforementioned campaigns against sexual and gender self-determination. Whether the stories described are true or not is ultimately not decisive for the course of the debate, as Stead’s *The Maiden Tribune to Modern Babylon* – or, as Heinrich calls it: ‘press campaign’ (Heinrich & Heimowski, 2016) – from 1885 impressively demonstrated. The contrived ‘Lisa case,’ earned *Mission Freedom* critical media and political attention for a short time in 2013, but: once the story is out, it is not at all important whether it is true, but whether the emotionalized or morally panicked target group can *imagine* that it *could be* true. When Shaw wrote his novel about Eliza Doolittle, it was known for a long time that Stead had stunted and carefully curated the ‘Eliza Armstrong case’ himself. This did not at all diminish the effectiveness of the story. Today, anti-sex work circles glorify Stead as a hero because he kidnapped and abducted a child in 1885 (LightUp Movement, 2024).

To sum up: Was it a good idea to write this text and come to the conference?

Probably yes. In the end, you, the reader decides, at least regarding the text. Shortly before the conference, we founded the research collective *FundiWatch*. All four of us, although from very different backgrounds, felt that the topic of Christian fundamentalism receives too little attention in Germany. Islamic fundamentalism is the subject of breaking news, but Christian fundamentalism has so far been little talked about. As I finish this article (May 2025), another *Protestant Church Day* (“Kirchentag”) is taking place. As far as I can see, a critical debate on Christian fundamentalism within the ranks of the protestant church in Germany is not an issue there. There was no room for a workshop pitched by us. The potential for extremism for this kind

9 This involved raising the age of consent from 13 to 16 years for minors.

of radicalization, networking and campaigning (Paul, 2023) has so far been little understood and only exceptionally picked up by journalists or politicians.

And this while a worship band from the Christian fundamentalist spectrum has only just reached number 1 in the charts in Germany... (Offizielle Deutsche Charts, 2025).

Shortly before finishing this text, I received the following information: *Diakonie Bayern* has admitted *Parakaleo e.V.* (Diakonie Bayern, 2025). This is a Nuremberg-based project aimed at sex workers, whose board of directors includes the preacher Justin Shrum from the *Alive Church* (a charismatic Pentecostal free church). He promotes his work as a 'missionary project' on the pages of international fundamentalist missionary organizations. Shrum is also committed to the introduction of a ban of 'buying sex' in Germany. He is also chairman of *The Justice Project*, which runs 'counselling centers' in the German federal state of Baden-Württemberg. According to its own homepage, the story of *The Justice Project* also begins with another very sad story (The Justice Project, 2025) capable of triggering fear, outrage and empathy. Once again: suffering and violence cannot be justified by anything. But the appropriation of the experiences of anonymous people and tokenizing them for political purposes in the style of moral panics, as done by Justin Shrum, nevertheless remains worthy of major criticism. Especially in the fields of culture war-topics approaches based only on religious values should be carefully evaluated and sex workers should be listened to, what we want for ourselves. About such stories I hear next to nothing.

The storytelling of Christian fundamentalist projects remains storytelling, a storytelling that should be fact-checked and analysed in terms of its conclusions and implications, but also its links to and foundational function for far-right discourses.

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