

The Anti-Trafficking Cause: From exceptionalism to shared struggle

Sienna Baskin and Huey Hewitt

Response to the ATR debate proposition ‘It is worth undermining the anti-trafficking cause in order to more directly challenge the systems producing everyday abuses within the global economy.’

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This reflection was written collaboratively by a long-time advocate and director of the Anti-Trafficking Fund in the United States and by a student of African American history, an intern with the Anti-Trafficking Fund. These different perspectives gave us an opportunity to develop a dialogue about the anti-trafficking cause, and problems in its approach which are apparent from the outside and from within.

What is Worth Undermining?

The anti-trafficking movement in the United States has long relied on a narrative of *exceptionalism and individualism*. The modern movement began with a push to establish a coherent legal framework to address forced labour and allow its victims to seek justice. A few high-profile and egregious cases were the impetus for this advocacy, giving advocates salient stories to tell of individuals harmed by trafficking. The resulting law treats human trafficking as a crime meriting extraordinary punishment and extraordinary remedies.

This narrative has proven incredibly powerful and continues to be used to garner attention and concern for the cause. It raises funds and opens hearts. It has created a ‘bubble’ of protection and access for survivors who can convince the state of their victimhood. But it also effectively silences critique. Who, after all, wants to question the number of dollars spent or the possibility of harmful

side effects when people are being trafficked and enslaved?¹ Would we not want any and all action to be taken, no matter the cost, if it happened to us or our loved ones?

News coverage of human trafficking amplifies this approach. A 2016 review of trafficking-related articles published by US news media found that journalists simplify the issue by focusing on the worst cases.² They may do so out of a desire to tell an ‘unambiguous’ story, to provoke action and sympathy, but they leave out the complexity needed for real solutions.³ This problem is not confined to the US: a 2019 review of UK print media by the NGO Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX) found that the majority of trafficking-related media articles focus on the criminal prosecution of perpetrators. Very little coverage explored structural drivers like labour market issues, racism, immigration policy, and regulation.⁴ Yet these are precisely the drivers of trafficking that need to be addressed in order to make progress in the fight against it.⁵

However well intentioned, focusing exclusively on exceptional stories of trauma and redemption can actually harm survivors and those at risk of trafficking. The 2016 news analysis found that journalists employ a ‘hierarchy of victimhood’ where the ideal victim is ‘weak, vulnerable, and trafficked by a shadowy, dangerous offender.’⁶ By focusing on the worst cases and telling stories of powerless victims, news stories obscure the complexities of victims’ lives and make it difficult for those who fall short of this standard to come forward. These stories re-affirm a government approach which requires survivors to convince the state that their trauma is extreme enough to merit support and

¹ The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) has done much to direct our attention to this collateral harm. See: M Dottridge (ed.), *Collateral Damage: The impact of anti-trafficking measures on human rights around the world*, GAATW, Bangkok, 2007, <https://gaatw.org/resources/publications/908-collateral-damage-the-impact-of-anti-trafficking-measures-on-human-rights-around-the-world>.

² R Sanford, D E Martinez, and R Weitzer, ‘Framing Human Trafficking: A content analysis of recent U.S. newspaper articles’, *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2016, pp. 139-155, p. 146, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2015.1107341>.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴ E Kenway, ‘Anti-Slavery Day 2019: What are we talking about when we talk about “modern slavery”?’ Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX), 17 October 2019, <https://www.labourexploitation.org/news/anti-slavery-day-2019-what-are-we-talking-about-when-we-talk-about-%E2%80%98modern-slavery%E2%80%99>.

⁵ G LeBaron, N Howard, C Thibos and P Kyristis, *Confronting Root Causes: Forced labour in global supply chains*, openDemocracy and University of Sheffield, 2018, https://cdn-prod.opendemocracy.net/media/documents/Confronting_Root_Causes_Forced_Labour_In_Global_Supply_Chains.pdf.

⁶ Sanford, Martinez and Weitzer, pp. 142, 151.

care. This narrative props up vigilante groups who showily ‘rescue’ victims only to later abandon them to fend for themselves.⁷ If survivors of trafficking are constantly exceptionalised, it can be hard for them to unite with those similarly situated to build power.

And there are those who intentionally use these narratives to advance carceral, nationalist, and misogynist policies. Grantees of NEO Philanthropy report that the bubble of protection has burst under the current administration of President Donald Trump, and survivors who are not US citizens now can rarely obtain the remedies to which the law entitles them. Meanwhile, the Trump administration proudly claims to be fighting human trafficking, painting pictures of women being brought captive over our borders by ‘bad hombres’,⁸ while restricting abortion access and tearing families apart. The anti-trafficking field has recoiled and pointed out the blatant racism and cynicism in Trump’s policies, yet the public still responds to these images. They lock into a deeply held idea that trafficking is about individual victims suffering exceptional crimes, rather than unjust socio-economic and political systems. And we, as anti-trafficking advocates, are partially responsible for that idea being so deeply held.

The individualist narrative in anti-trafficking work is especially ironic in the United States, with our history of chattel slavery. Chattel slavery cannot be understood unless one thinks in terms of systems—economic, legal, racial, and cultural—and their effects. A failure to reckon with the legacies of transatlantic enslavement has produced contemporary inequalities that are evident in patterns of unemployment, poverty, and homelessness amongst Black people. It is also reflected in inequalities in the prison system, and in the way policing, courts, and post-release surveillance play out depending on race. Recognising this has produced a contemporary prison abolitionist movement that refers to incarceration as ‘modern slavery’, not just because today’s prisoners are economically exploited, but because the forms of anti-Blackness found in plantations and prisons are affectively and historically linked.⁹ Chattel slavery also spawned scientific racism: the categorising of ethnic groups as biologically inferior, which has affected even non-Black people of colour. For these reasons,

⁷ A Lange, “‘8 Minutes’ Trafficking Victim Adviser Says Producers Ignored Her Advice”, *BuzzFeed*, 11 May 2015, retrieved 20 July 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/arianelange/8-minutes-trafficking-victim-adviser-says-producers-ignored>.

⁸ See E Burmila, ‘Scientific Racism Isn’t “Back”—It never went away’, *The Nation*, 6 April 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/scientific-racism-isnt-back-it-never-went-away>.

⁹ See A DuVernay (Dir.), *13th*, Kandoo Films, 2016; see also: K R Johnson, ‘Prison Labor Is Modern Slavery. I’ve been sent to solitary for speaking out’, *The Guardian*, 23 August 2018, retrieved 30 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/23/prisoner-speak-out-american-slave-labor-strike>.

when US anti-trafficking activists, some of whom call themselves ‘modern day abolitionists’, push for prosecutors to send more people to prison and fail to acknowledge the role of systems in creating exploitation, they expose their ignorance of the wider dynamics and history of their own field.

What is Worth Preserving and Transforming?

It is worth undermining these narratives and associated approaches to human trafficking. However, this does not mean we need to abandon the cause of ending human trafficking. Human trafficking is not a distraction from the erosion or lack of rights and protections in the workplace. It is a *result* of the erosion of these rights. In some locations and industries, forced labour *is* the everyday abuse. It is the natural result of the regular and smooth operations of labour markets and migration systems. This is what makes it so devastating, and so illuminating. We need not undermine the cause of ending human trafficking in order to widen our aperture.

Instead, we need to bring the cause into comprehensive movements for racial justice, gender equity, migrants’ and workers’ rights. Solutions to human trafficking are to be found within the goals of these movements. When all people have the right to migrate and work safely, and when people of all genders and races have the same rights and opportunities, human trafficking will cease to be a systemic problem. And these movements benefit from understanding human trafficking; its survivors have salient lessons for us all about how the economy is structured. We have seen positive trends among grantees of NEO Philanthropy; anti-trafficking organisations who have embraced this wider framework. This includes the National Survivor Network uniting behind a platform which includes raising the minimum wage,¹⁰ Damayan Migrant Workers Association sponsoring a worker co-operative founded by survivors of labour exploitation to build safe and equitable jobs for themselves and their peers,¹¹ and the Human Trafficking Legal Center and many other anti-trafficking organisations standing up against anti-immigrant enforcement and border wall construction.¹² With these and other similar initiatives they are challenging the systems that perpetuate human trafficking. They are changing the narrative, and we should follow their lead.

¹⁰ See <https://nationalsurvivornetwork.org/policy-advocacy>.

¹¹ See <https://www.damayanmigrants.org/damayan-workers-cooperative>.

¹² See S Jorgensen and P Sandoval, ‘Experts: Trump’s tape-bound women trafficking claim is misleading’, *CNN*, 28 January 2019, retrieved 3 August 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/27/us/human-trafficking-fact-check/index.html>.

Sienna Baskin is Director of the Anti-Trafficking Fund at NEO Philanthropy. The Anti-Trafficking Fund provides grants to prevent human trafficking and aid its survivors in the United States, and implements a strategy based in immigrant rights, labour rights, economic/social justice, and human rights. Before joining NEO Philanthropy, Sienna Baskin was Managing Director of the Urban Justice Center's Sex Workers Project, where she worked to protect the rights of victims of trafficking and sex workers. Email: sbaskin@neophilanthropy.org

Huey Hewitt is a first-year PhD student in the Department of African & African-American Studies at Harvard University. He is a former intern with the Anti-Trafficking Fund at NEO Philanthropy. Before, during, and after his time with NEO, Huey Hewitt has worked as a community organiser alongside currently and formerly incarcerated people—especially those who have been criminalised as survivors of trafficking, domestic violence, and other forms of abuse. Email: hueydhewitt@hotmail.com