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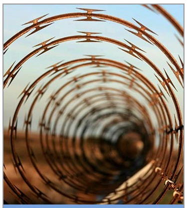
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Introduction: do the hidden costs outweigh the practical benefits of human trafficking awareness campaigns?

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Raising awareness campaigns may be motivated by good intentions, but how much do they actually accomplish? What are the costs and benefits of campaigns? What works and doesn't work? How can we know?

Policy debate

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

Do the hidden costs outweigh the practical benefits?

We asked 10 people who work with human trafficking awareness the following: 'Campaigns to raise public awareness of human trafficking may have flaws, but their overall impact is positive. YES OR NO?'

Convenors

Elena Shih & Joel Quirk

Elena Shih is an Assistant Professor of American Studies and Ethnic Studies at Brown University.

Joel Quirk is Professor in Political Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa).

Introduction: do the hidden costs outweigh the practical benefits of human trafficking awareness campaigns?

Respondents

Anne Elizabeth Moore (NO)
Author of Threadbare: Clothes, Sex & Trafficking

Katherine Chon (YES)
Director, Office on Trafficking in Persons, US Dept. of Health and Human Services

Joanna Ewart-James (YES)
Advocacy Director at Walk Free

David Feingold (NO)
Director of the Ophidian Research Institute

Matthew Friedman (YES)
CEO for The Mekong Club

Zoe Trodd (NO)
University of Nottingham

Cris Sardina (NO)
Director of Desiree Alliance

Marilyn Murray (YES)
Creative Director at Love146

Sameera Hafiz (NO)
Advocacy Director at the National Domestic Workers Alliance

About the authors

Joel Quirk is Professor in Political Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. His research focuses upon slavery and abolition, human mobility and human rights, repairing historical wrongs, and the history and politics of sub-Saharan Africa. Joel is currently a member of the International Scientific Committee of the UNESCO Slave Route Project, where he serves as Rapporteur. Your can follow him on twitter at @joelquirk.

Elena Shih is an Assistant Professor of American Studies and Ethnic Studies at Brown University. Her current book project, *The Price of Freedom: Moral and Political Economies of Global Human Trafficking Rescue*, is based off 40 months of ethnographic participant observation of the transnational movement to combat human

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Beyond Trafficking and Slavery seeks to help those trying to understand forced labour, trafficking and slavery by combining the rigour of academic scholarship with the clarity of journalism. Our goal is to use evidence-based advocacy to unveil the structural political, economic, and social root causes of global exploitation.

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Ima Matul (YES)
Survivor of Human Trafficking

Replies

Borislav Gerasimov (NO)
Advocacy Officer at Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

Jamison Liang (YES)
Digital Programme Officer at IOM X

Kelli Lynn Johnson (NO)
Associate Professor, Miami University Hamilton

Dina Haynes (NO)
Professor, New England Law|Boston

Tryon P. Woods & P. Khalil Saucier (NO)
Assistant Professor, University of Massachusetts; Associate Professor, Rhode Island College

Lyndsey P. Beutin (NO)
Doctoral candidate, University of Pennsylvania

Campaigners, activists and government officials spend much of their time and energy crafting messages that are designed to win specific audiences over to their cause. The main goal behind these messages is to 'raise awareness' of specific problems or issues, and to offer target audiences with potential solutions or remedies. Drawing upon modern marketing techniques, these public awareness campaigns take increasingly diverse forms, including lectures and talks, symbolic displays of solidarity, documentaries and movies, public performances, and social media initiatives.

In the case of human trafficking awareness campaigns, which are our subject for debate, recent initiatives include the Blue Heart Campaign as an 'international symbol against human trafficking'; media reports instructing people to 'spot the signs' of trafficking and slavery in locations such as airports, nail salons, or hospitals; numerous public marches under banners such 'walk for freedom' or 'tasting freedom'; the installation of life-sized human dolls on street corners under the banner 'children aren't playthings'; and the launch of both documentaries and fictional movies designed to get the message out.

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Young people Kiev, Ukraine, perform a symbolic tableau to raise awareness of human trafficking in 2016. Efrem Lukatsky/AP/Press Association. All rights reserved.

Some awareness campaigns are targeted at specific audiences, such as making workers aware of their legal rights and available resources. Others are much more general. These campaigns are not confined to civil society, but regularly include governments and international organisations. In 2010, the United States Senate designated 11 January 'human trafficking awareness day', which was later expanded to awareness month in 2011. The United Nations has similarly designated 30 July as 'world day against trafficking in persons'. In this policy debate, we take the US version as an opportunity to reflect on the benefits and costs of raising awareness campaigns.

Hidden costs and complications

The basic idea behind all of these campaigns is to inspire both individuals and institutions to 'do something' (there is even a campaign called DoSomething.org). While taking action against injustice is undoubtedly a laudable impulse, the 'something' in question is by no means as straightforward as it might first appear. According to a now substantial number of critics, awareness campaigns suffer from a number of flaws.

trafficking. She is also a Faculty Fellow leading the Human Trafficking Research Cluster through the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice. She tweets at: @uhlenna.

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Samuel Okyere

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One now well-established line of critique concerns the uncertain connection between information and action. Too many campaigns against trafficking echo the logic of 'trickle down' economics, wherein awareness is assumed to translate into effective action. But the actual mechanics of this process of translation are rarely spelt out in any detail, or subjected to scrutiny using social science research techniques. Raising awareness may well capture headlines, but how much of the energy invested leads to concrete results?

> **Raising awareness may capture headlines, but how much of the energy invested leads to concrete results?**

Another common line of critique concerns the problems inherent in sensationalism, voyeurism, and distortion. The primary argument here is that too many of the images, statistics, and stories that feature in awareness campaigns are simplistic, misleading and inappropriate, and thereby offer audiences an inaccurate and unhelpful picture of the key issues associated with human trafficking. Awareness campaigns may well reach large audiences, but are they teaching them the right things?

Learning, compromise and the urgency of action

The most common response to these twin challenges is to point to differences between specific campaigns, with the key idea being that there is a right and wrong way to campaign. Some anti-trafficking campaigns may well make mistakes, or so this line of argument goes, but this is by no means true of all campaigns in the field. While there is clearly merit to this overall line of argument, there is also a notable reluctance amongst many anti-trafficking campaigners to publicly identify specific examples of the 'wrong' types of campaigns. They instead prefer to speak in non-specific terms, and to express their hopes that any issues have been – so soon will be – dispatched to the past.

This emphasis on learning is important, because campaigners routinely invest considerable time and energy trying to improve how they communicate. However, any discussion of improvement also brings up a further discussion of trade-offs and compromises between accessibility and complexity. As any marketing consultant can tell you, any message that is too complicated is unlikely to find a receptive audience. Campaigners are acutely aware of this challenge, and therefore make a deliberate effort to craft their messages in ways that are designed to have the greatest possible appeal. This trade-off is not solely a matter of simplification, although this is obviously a recurring issue, but it also extends to the kinds of stories, statistics and images that are foregrounded, and to the problems and limitations that may be downplayed or ignored.

> **Campaigners are acutely aware of the trade-off between accessibility and complexity, and deliberately craft their messages to have the greatest possible appeal.**

These types of trade-offs can be described in terms of either necessary compromises or as illegitimate corner cutting. It is not always clear, however, to which category specific cases belong. One prominent example here is the now infamous case of Somaly Mam, who was revealed to have fabricated stories that were foundational to her anti-trafficking organisation's success. While Mam was forced to resign, there continue to be a number of people who question whether or not these fabrications represented a mortal sin, given all of her other good work.

There are many other occasions, however, where the key question is not so much about fact or fiction, but instead concerns questions of tactics and packaging, such as when to make use of celebrities as public champions, or how to make use of visual images of 'vulnerable' women and children from the Global South. It may well be recognised – either privately or publicly – that some statistics, tactics, or images are flawed, but this recognition is paired with the additional argument that their contribution to campaigning efforts outweighs any potential negatives or limitations.

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READING THE SIGNS

Police Scotland launches a new leaflet entitled 'Human Trafficking - Reading the Signs'. Andrew Milligan/Press Association. All rights reserved.

It is here that raising awareness campaigns need to be understood within the context of other interventions and goals. While some organisations specifically focus upon awareness raising efforts, others regard awareness as one aspect of a larger portfolio, which can include research, legal reform and lobbying, fund raising, or on the ground interventions. Within this portfolio, awareness can be best understood as an initial step that will hopefully pave the way for both greater investment and greater awareness of complexity.

Public awareness becomes indispensable when viewed as the first step in a longer journey, since everything else is heavily reliant upon initial conversion. This last point has far-reaching ramifications. Campaigners and activists are often well aware that there are problems and limitations, but they also tend to have limited sympathy for criticism from ‘the sidelines’. Public awareness is a condition of action, and action against trafficking is an urgent imperative that can trump other considerations.

Are anti-trafficking awareness campaigns helping or hurting?

> **Public awareness becomes indispensable when viewed as the first step in a longer journey, since action may be sparked by an initial conversion.**

Defenders of public awareness campaigns have few doubts that their efforts are having a positive impact. They accept that some things might be improved, but any improvements are regarded as *refinements within a legitimate and valuable project*. The overall goal is to ensure that specific campaigns help the cause more effectively in the future. By contrast, some critics of public awareness campaigns – or at least of mainstream anti-trafficking campaigns –strive to *contain or prevent the damage* that they believe these campaigns inflict.

Defenders emphasise the value of awareness campaigns in disseminating essential information. Critics maintain that the information provided is too often inadequate, insensitive, or unhelpful. Defenders emphasise the value of campaigns in generating funding streams and supporters. Critics maintain that the funds raised are too often wasted, or put to the wrong uses.

Defenders emphasise the role of campaigns in inspiring action. Critics maintain that the actions that campaigns usually recommend are superficial, and that the deeper political and economic causes of exploitation and vulnerability are excluded from the equation. Defenders regard campaigns as one component of a larger portfolio. Critics maintain that campaigns too often become an end in themselves. Defenders highlight the unique evils associated with human trafficking. Critics maintain that a narrow and exceptional focus on human trafficking too often excludes larger systemic patterns of vulnerability, complicity, and exploitation.

While not all of these highly polarised positions apply to specific campaigns to same degree, they nonetheless serve to highlight core differences in perspective and approach. To help adjudicate between competing approaches, we have brought together ten leading experts from government, civil society, academia, and journalism to share their views on whether the practical benefits of raising awareness exceed the hidden costs.

This series has been produced with support from Brown University's Center for the Study of Slavery and Yale University's Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition.

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