



How Advocates Fighting Human Trafficking Can Overcome Divisions and Build Momentum

Laura Murphy, Loyola University New Orleans

Slavery is illegal in all nations, but that has not stopped unscrupulous merchants from trafficking in coerced prostitution and other kinds of forced labor; nor has it prevented even normal-looking householders from exploiting indentured servants against their will. The scourge of slavery persists for some 27 million people in the current century, according to the careful estimate of Kevin Bales in his book *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*.

Around the world as well as in the United States, many ethically inspired groups have mobilized to fight contemporary forms of slave labor. At times, however, the anti-trafficking movement has been hampered by divided goals, confused definitions, and cross-cutting issues. Nevertheless, there are promising ways to build momentum.

Opposition to Trafficking and Crosscutting Issues of Sexual Morality

Human trafficking has been taken on by a broad coalition of faith-based groups – ranging from evangelical Protestants, to Catholic women in religious orders, to Zionist Jews. Religiously inspired activists primarily focus on sex trafficking, especially of U.S. minors, and they have been joined by many advocates who do not profess a religious faith. Given the obvious repulsiveness of the sexual exploitation of children, the issue can inspire broad coalition-building. However, other controversies have intruded – infiltrating the fight against sex trafficking with proxy wars over sexuality, sex work, and abortion.

- When the Trafficking Victims Protection Act was reauthorized in 2003 by a Republican-controlled U.S. Congress, the bill included language that provided funding only to service providers who would explicitly pledge not to “promote, support, or advocate the legalization or practice of prostitution.”
- In 2005, certain faith-based anti-trafficking groups lobbied for and won provisions to fund only programs that reduce all prostitution. They thereby shifted the focus away from coercive trafficking toward the elimination of all kinds of sex work, coercive or not.
- In 2011, abortion became a prominent dividing line among anti-trafficking advocates, because the Department of Health and Human Services started to deny funding to service providers that refuse to offer abortion counseling to victims.

Such hot-button, divisive moral concerns stalled the reauthorization of anti-trafficking legislation in Congress, leaving it in limbo for almost two years (until, very recently, when Congress managed to include reauthorization in the 2013 Violence Against Women Act). What difference does all of this make? Efforts to legislate additional moral issues have had the overall effect of limiting access to social services vitally needed by survivors of coercive trafficking. Life becomes less safe for victims when advocates let themselves be diverted by other cultural and religious issues, losing sight of their shared concerns and goals.

Is the Fight about Sex Trafficking Only – Or Against All Forms of Coerced Labor?

Globally, for every one victim of sex trafficking there are eight victims of other kinds of labor trafficking – such as indentured domestic work or forced employment in mining, agriculture, and other kinds of dangerous or onerous work. Sex trafficking gets most of the attention from anti-trafficking advocates and media exposés. Sex is sexy, and people are eager to see spectacularized movies about girls being traded in prostitution markets. Most people are sufficiently appalled by sexual exploitation that they will rally to combat such abuse of women (leaving aside the fact that men and boys, too, are often victims). For several reasons, less attention is paid to the horrors of other kinds of labor trafficking.

- Legal and illegal immigrants make up the vast majority of the trafficked laborers, but immigration policies are often divisive. For example, U.S. programs for temporary migrants are full of loopholes that make it easy for employers to exploit “guest workers.” Anxieties are spiked by debates about where to draw the line between coercion and legal labor supervision.
- Direct coercion is not the only issue, because many large U.S. companies benefit financially from the use of unpaid or confined laborers by companies in their supply chains.
- It is not easy for advocates to draw attention to all of the world’s trafficking victims. Most live outside the United States among the billions struggling to get by on less than two dollars a day.

Yet lack of attention to all kinds of labor trafficking makes the world’s most vulnerable people even more vulnerable. Confining the spotlight only to sex exploitation or to victims in developed countries makes it easier for traffickers to hide many prevalent kinds of extreme exploitation.

Building on Areas of Agreement

For as long as abolitionists have sought to eradicate slavery, they have grappled with divisions. Yet the new abolitionist movement can build momentum by addressing less controversial but still pressing problems, and by offering solutions likely to be broadly acceptable.

- All can agree that the forced exploitation of anyone’s labor is unethical – no matter the line of work or identity of the victims.
- Healing and harm-reduction services must be offered to all victims of exploitation, no matter what they may choose to do after they receive assistance.
- Immigration reform should close legal loopholes that prevent guest workers from changing employers or blowing the whistle on workplace abuses.
- Law enforcement employees should receive special training to investigate trafficking and interview all potential victims with sensitivity and respect.
- Survivors are the people best-positioned to teach law enforcement, advocates, and researchers about the dynamics of coercive labor trafficking and effective ways to rescue its victims.

Read more in Laura Murphy, editor, *Survivors of Slavery: 20th and 21st Century Slave Narratives* (Columbia University Press, forthcoming) and Kevin Bales, *Ending Slavery* (University of California Press, 2008).