EXPLOITING EXPLOITATION: IMPROPER USE OF THE TRAFFICKING NARRATIVE

MARYLAND VOLUNTEER LAWYERS SERVICE

HTPP
The Human Trafficking Prevention Project

Despite having a legal definition that is over two decades old, startling misperceptions about human trafficking persist. Popular television and media, governmental bodies, and even anti-trafficking organizations themselves commonly traffic in misinformation that perpetuates racialized, gendered, and class-based myths about who is being victimized as well as who is doing the victimizing. As a result, trafficking, particularly the exploitation of children, has become the perfect vehicle for politicians and other groups to capitalize on to further their own political agendas and to obscure far less palatable objectives.

WAYS TO SPOT AND COMBAT MISINFORMATION ABOUT HUMAN TRAFFICKING

- **Check your sources**: Literally, check them! Does your information source cite its source of information? If not, request access to and review it, *before* publishing and/or repeating the information provided.
- **Does the "solution" center the need for increased criminalization or the restriction of individual rights?** Policies and/or legislation that center criminalization and/or rights restrictions will undoubtedly do more harm than good. Remember, the issue isn't simple, so the solutions never will be either.
- **Consider whether the issue of trafficking is being used as a "cover" to harm other vulnerable groups, or to perpetuate stereotypical narratives around victims and villains**: Taking a human rights approach to human trafficking means rejecting that which increases vulnerability for other marginalized groups, or which is rooted in racism, xenophobia, and the like. Just say no!

REAL-WORLD WAYS TO COMBAT EXPLOITATION OF THE TRAFFICKING NARRATIVE

- **Seek to Address the Root Causes of Trafficking**: Look for ways to address the systemic inequities and barriers that increase vulnerability to trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Consider how restrictions on individual rights, such as through the "War on Drugs," harsh immigration penalties, and/or the criminalization of poverty, enable the conditions that allow trafficking to flourish. Steer policymakers away from that which centers only on the prosecution and punishment of traffickers and evaluate proposed legislation through an anti-oppression lens.
- **Join the MD Human Trafficking Task Force's Legislative Subcommittee**: Subcommittee members work to determine changes that would improve Maryland's human trafficking laws, partner with legislators, lobby for important initiatives, and testify on human trafficking legislation. For more information or to sign up, please contact the MD HT Task Force at: http://www.mdhumantrafficking.org/contact-us.
- **Follow Organizations Focused on Combatting Violence, Poverty, and criminalization**: The Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence, Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and the Women's Law Center of Maryland, all of whom are HT Task Force Members, have active social media sites providing regular updates on proposed legislation and provide action alerts, as do organizations like the Job Opportunities Task Force, Out for Justice, and Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition, who focus on ending the criminalization of poverty and economic justice for those impacted by the criminal legal system.

This tip sheet was created as a part of the Human Trafficking Prevention Project (HTPP), working in partnership with Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service (MVLS).

Definitions and principles on this tip sheet are adapted from the HTPP webinar: *"Exploiting Exploitation: Improper Use of the Trafficking Narrative,"* available at www.mvlslaw.org/ht/resources.

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