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ABSTRACT

Critiquing America's Response to Human Trafficking: Race, Gender, and Colonialism Narratives in a COVID-19 Context

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Overview

In January President Trump signed an executive order¹ creating a position on his domestic policy team to focus exclusively on human trafficking. The summit for this commemorated the 20th anniversary of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the backbone of US trafficking legislation and a foundation for legislation globally. Some anti-trafficking groups praised Trump's attempt to spotlight the issue, but others boycotted it pointing out immigrant victims have been ignored or harmed by his response. Barely two months later, the world saw the outbreak of COVID-19, and its ever-growing presence and impact has caused unprecedented shifts in how humans interact with policy, the economy, and each other.

While the US has had twenty years to evolve anti-trafficking efforts, Bales² describes it as "simplistic, emotive, disparate, and disorganized." Risley³ breaks down US response further, commenting it "supports the infantilization, demonization, dehumanization, and sexual commodification of the 'Other.'" In 2016, there were an estimated 40.3 million⁴ human trafficking victims globally and 60,000 in the US. Gerasimov describes human trafficking as "a symptom, not as a disease itself,"⁵ citing larger structural vulnerabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic has created more vulnerable populations, stressing family and nonprofit finances

¹ Contrera, 2020.

² Bales, 2014.

³ Risley, 2015.

⁴ Walk Free Foundation, 2018.

⁵ Hoang, 2020.

alike; it has also caused a rise in online child sexual exploitation, an increase in violence towards victims, and a loss of support systems for survivors.⁶

Layered on this unprecedented health crisis, there is unprecedented involvement in antiracist action globally, most notably through Black Lives Matter.⁷ These two unforeseen global shifts have forced systematic vulnerabilities to the fore, creating a “crisis-induced window of opportunity”⁸ for actors to change policies to address exploitation. There is an added sense of urgency with the upcoming US presidential election. With Trump's recent promise to commit \$42 million more to trafficking programs and prosecutions, the question arises: who is protected, who is prosecuted, and who is the ‘Other’ especially in light of COVID-19?

Research Objectives

This research focuses on US trafficking response, considering current antiracist action and COVID-exacerbated vulnerabilities like race, gender, socioeconomic status, and colonialism. It will examine what is being overlooked and implications for future policies. Due to the timeline and previous work, the author will use one state as a case study. Objectives include:

- Identify groups responding to trafficking in the state
- Explore activities and narratives of their responses, especially with COVID-19 caused limits
- Determine how race, gender, socioeconomic status, and colonialism are discussed (if at all) and if there is intersectionality with antiracist action etc.
- Examine how the state can create a “truly inclusive and multicultural”⁹ response in the midst of COVID-19 and changing leadership; where *should* things go in future?

⁶ Tech Against Trafficking, 2020.

⁷ Black Lives Matter.

⁸ Hoang, 2020.

⁹ Meghji, 2019.

Methodology

The author wishes to explore if they may add to this discussion, and particularly hopes to learn from indigenous leaders. To do so, they propose the following methods:

- *Investigate archival and academic materials* - They will conduct preliminary research on available literature on statewide trafficking response and relevant sociological studies, which may include discussions of otherization, deservingness, and categorical inequality.¹⁰ This will create a framework to inform interviews.
- *Conduct interviews* - To put participants at the center of knowledge production and to avoid becoming a 'car-window sociologist,'¹¹ they will utilize snowball sampling. Their connections with one state's 93 groups responding to trafficking, including 25 Tribal governments, NGOs, law enforcement, and task forces¹² will prove invaluable. They anticipate discussions may include white savior narratives, gendered approaches, and indigenous perspectives on colonialism. They will code these themes, which will illustrate various (and likely conflicting) narratives.

Background Literature

There is a dearth of literature on local, on-the-ground responses to trafficking. Foot¹³ examines these local responses, considering financial resources, status, race, gender, beliefs, and values in the US. In particular, she finds that "whites only start to care ... when they realize that it happens to people who look like them or their children." However, it is "glossed over" that African American females are the population most likely to be victimized by sex trafficking; in 2011 ninety-eight percent of US labor trafficking victims and seventy-four percent of sex trafficking victims were non-Caucasians.

¹⁰ Doidge and Saini, 2020.

¹¹ Meghji, 2019.

¹² Oklahoma Human Trafficking Task Force, 2013.

¹³ Foot, 2015.

Williamson¹⁴ elaborates on how the US perpetuates a concept of the “ideal victim” as passive and simultaneously ignores girls of color as victims of sex trafficking. Butler traces racial roots of trafficking in the US and argues that a process of “othering” makes people of color and Native people particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking and describes the intersecting vulnerabilities of race, class, age, and gender. Risley¹⁵ agrees and argues many anti-trafficking policies are re-victimizing trafficked persons and also undermining women's rights.

Kujawa¹⁶ explores one state's context: the highest female incarceration rate per capita in the world, low economic standards, low education ratings, and high levels of abuse. This incarceration rate is particularly relevant in COVID-19 times as the US has turned to prison labor to meet mask and sanitizer demands.¹⁷ Logan¹⁸ discusses Native American tribes in a trafficking context and explores the historical distrust between tribes and the federal government, describing how complicated trafficking responses are due to layered jurisdictions. Native American vulnerability is sadly compounded by COVID-19, as Natives are five times more likely to be hospitalized than white people.¹⁹ To date, there is a dearth of trafficking literature considering intersectional vulnerabilities, especially in localized on-the-ground responses and virtually none exploring this in a world of COVID-19. Further study is needed, bearing in mind the connection between the local and the global today and the urgency of this current policy window.

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¹⁴ Williamson, 2017.

¹⁵ Risley, 2015.

¹⁶ Kujawa, 2013.

¹⁷ Smith and Cockayne, 2020.

¹⁸ Logan, 2015.

¹⁹ McPhillips, 2020.

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