

# How I as a Fundraiser Would Use Twenty Million Dollars for Anti-Trafficking Work

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## Abstract

Representations of human trafficking in film and media have widely missed the mark by misinforming the public and funders and harming those with lived experience. This has real implications for the anti-trafficking movement, including a lack of sufficient financial support for victim services and the failure to implement long-term systemic change. To change this, this article argues that we must invest in narrative change around human trafficking, under the leadership of those with lived experience. If done well, this could potentially bring additional funding for services by reaching the wider public, and even move the needle on trafficking prevention.

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The call for papers invited authors to reflect on the question 'What would be the best use of twenty million US dollars for anti-trafficking work?' If every person working on human trafficking in the United States were to answer this question, I would anticipate a lack of consensus. This suggests a healthy debate, but a lack of clarity is confusing to funders. I will answer the question from my experience working in the areas of fundraising and communications for a US-based human trafficking service provider.

I argue that, beyond guaranteeing services for victims, we need to trace the roots of our movement's challenges and prioritise evidence-based narrative change about human trafficking. In social justice work, we say that storytelling is key to advocacy and that data is hard to digest. I recently asked a group of high school pupils what human trafficking was and one began to answer with, 'It's when people

are kidnapped'. According to the Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative, only 3% of human trafficking victims were abducted into their situation.<sup>1</sup>

What is missing is not increased *awareness* of human trafficking as an issue but creating *authentic* and *accurate* film and media depictions of it, for example, by exploring who are the most common victims and traffickers, what are the most common methods of control, and what are the solutions, according to survivors. The point of accuracy is not pedantry; inaccurate depictions of human trafficking have real-world implications. For example, many victims today are unable to identify that what they have experienced is human trafficking; even some organisations that exist to support crime victims are unable to do this—likely leaving thousands in the US without support.

Stories matter.

Film, media, and politicians have for years propagated misinformation and disinformation about human trafficking, causing the issue to be misconstrued by the American general public. Many films purporting to be about human trafficking sensationalise the issue beyond the most verifiably common survivors' experiences, limiting depictions to, for example, violent kidnapping of white, middle-class children and teenagers—usually girls—or smuggling people across the US-Mexico border, neither of which in and of themselves constitute human trafficking. As a result, most people will report having heard about human trafficking, citing films and news reports that peddle racist stereotypes and avoid explorations of root causes of trafficking, such as systemic racism,<sup>2</sup> oppression, and poverty. Simply because of what they have seen and read, many Americans may still not know that forced labour is a form of human trafficking, or that trafficking is experienced by US-born citizens. Onscreen depictions of victims often lean on stereotypes about immigrants and 'other' groups whose traffickers are their violent compatriots and not, for example, large American companies. According to the National Survivor Network, the only values-based membership association of survivors of human trafficking in the US, 'In 2008, the movie *Taken* presented a riveting image of human trafficking that captivated the public imagination and brought human trafficking to the forefront of many people's attention. Some people may assume this is a good thing, and yet for the past 15 years most anti-trafficking professionals (including those of us who have lived experience of human trafficking) have had to work harder than we otherwise would have to

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<sup>1</sup> 'Abducted Victims', Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative, n.d., retrieved 9 July 2024, <https://www.ctdatacollaborative.org/story/abducted-victims>.

<sup>2</sup> US Department of State, 'Acknowledging Historical and Ongoing Harm: The Connections Between Systemic Racism and Human Trafficking', 1 July 2021, <https://www.state.gov/acknowledging-historical-and-ongoing-harm-the-connections-between-systemic-racism-and-human-trafficking>.

counter widespread misinformation rooted in a Hollywood understanding of how trafficking happens.<sup>3</sup> The legal definition of human trafficking in the US is broad and encompasses exploitation for commercial gain through ‘force, fraud or coercion’.<sup>4</sup> Yet, film and media depictions like *Taken* have focused almost exclusively on violent methods of force (kidnap), missing the opportunity to demonstrate how, for example, invisible psychological control within relationships and at workplaces is used to exploit vulnerable people. Many on-screen depictions of human trafficking feature arrests of minors engaged in ‘prostitution’ (despite this automatically making them trafficking victims in the US), providing true-crime style entertainment while also reinforcing the concept of law enforcement as the primary and best instrument of anti-trafficking responses—something contested by many organisations, including my own.

Of known victims of human trafficking in the US, the majority are Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) and at least half are US citizens;<sup>5</sup> however, as of this writing, few if any US-made films about human trafficking created by BIPOC survivors have reached mass audiences. This tracks with documented trends in disproportionately low BIPOC representation behind the camera in Hollywood: between 2014 and 2020, 78 percent of documentary films distributed across cable, network, and streaming platforms were created by white directors or directing teams.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> National Survivor Network, ‘Hollywood and Human Trafficking’, 24 July 2023, <https://nationalsurvivornetwork.org/hollywood-and-human-trafficking>.

<sup>4</sup> *Victims of Trafficking And Violence Protection Act*, 2000, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-106publ386/pdf/PLAW-106publ386.pdf>, Sec. 103 (8): ‘The term “severe forms of trafficking in persons” means— (A) sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or (B) the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.’

<sup>5</sup> US Bureau of Justice Statistics, ‘Characteristics of Suspected Human Trafficking Incidents, 2008–2010’, 28 April 2011, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/press-release/characteristics-suspected-human-trafficking-incidents-2008-2010>. In the fiscal year 2022–23, 88% of victims served by the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking were BIPOC, and 62% were US citizens. See also: Coalition to Abolish Trafficking and Slavery, *Impact Report 2023. 25 Years of Justice, Healing and Inclusion of Survivors of Human Trafficking*, Cast, 2024, pp. 5–6, [https://www.castla.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/CastLA\\_2023ImpactReport\\_3-9-24\\_Lighter-v2.pdf](https://www.castla.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/CastLA_2023ImpactReport_3-9-24_Lighter-v2.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> C Borum, P Weissman, and D Conrad-Pérez, *The Lens Reflected: What Stories & Storytellers Get the Green Light in Documentary’s Streaming Age? Race, Gender, and Topics in Documentary Films Distributed Across Cable, Streaming, and Public Media Networks (2014–2020)*, Center for Media & Social Impact, November 2022.

It is clear that the public and policymakers want to see films about human trafficking and that they are influenced by them. The 2023 film *Sound of Freedom* grossed almost USD 250 million in the US. As one journalist noted, this film alone—‘in which every villain is Latino and the hero is a lone white man’ and which ends with the main character ‘canoeing into the jungle alone to rescue a little girl, fighting her trafficker in hand-to-hand combat and ultimately killing him’—has ‘awakened the passions of a broad swath of the right-wing and conspiratorial world’, including QAnon.<sup>7</sup> Despite widespread pushback from survivors and news media<sup>8</sup> about the accuracy and representativeness of the film, it was screened to members of the US Congress in July 2023. There are now so many films considered to be harmful that at least 100 survivors of human trafficking from around the world have created a list of survivor-vetted films;<sup>9</sup> though most are documentaries and not explicitly about human trafficking, they are highly relevant.

Intentional or not, such inaccurate depictions are at least partially responsible for the aforementioned poor understanding of human trafficking among the public.<sup>10</sup> The stereotypes bred as a result are not only barriers to progress, they are downright dangerous and a threat to justice, as survivors have frequently pointed out: ‘In at least one case, traffickers were found not guilty when the violence they enacted against their victims doesn’t “look like” what juries have come to believe trafficking is... [Disinformation] can even lead to the deaths of survivors when rescue operations that lack adequate preparation for the complex realities of trafficking go wrong...’<sup>11</sup> By dealing in and popularising false narratives, these depictions are also jeopardising funding initiatives for victim services and all parts of the anti-trafficking movement.

To counter harmful, sensationalistic stories, regain control of human trafficking narratives, and build a critical mass of informed Americans (including funders) supporting human rights approaches to anti-trafficking, we must invest in narrative change on human trafficking by supporting the creation and dissemination of

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<sup>7</sup> A Merlan, ‘Trafficking Survivors and Advocates Are Being Harassed by “Sound of Freedom” Fans’, *Vice*, 7 August 2023, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/epvbyz/trafficking-survivors-and-advocates-are-being-harassed-by-sound-of-freedom-fans>.

<sup>8</sup> K Abrams, ‘“Sound of Freedom” Misleads Audiences About the Horrible Reality of Human Trafficking’, *USA Today*, 28 July 2023, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2023/07/28/sound-freedom-movie-wrong-trafficking/70470178007>.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Survivor-Vetted Films About Human Trafficking’, n.d., retrieved 9 July 2024, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1CpP8cfdExeZ1WTcadAmGiaM53GcwjiFrzCK1BeXFjY>.

<sup>10</sup> K Sharapov, S Hoff, and B Gerasimov, ‘Editorial: Knowledge is Power, Ignorance is Bliss: Public Perceptions and Responses to Human Trafficking’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 13, 2019, pp. 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201219131>.

<sup>11</sup> National Survivor Network.

authentic, accurate depictions that are verifiably common while also nuanced, with mass appeal. Without generalising, we must tell new, compelling stories that point to the root causes of human trafficking and solutions to it, moving away from simplistic narratives about ideal victims who unluckily—or through a level of naïveté—found themselves in a bad situation, and not because compounding socio-economic and geo-political factors made them vulnerable. Critically, we must create opportunities for survivors—especially BIPOC—to be the creators of this narrative change. This is arduous, expensive, long-term work that cannot be done with a one-year grant. ‘We’ includes the entire film and media ecosystem, but our movement *must* make the case that demand for commercially-successful survivor-led storytelling can be created; as of this writing, *Baby Reindeer*, written by and starring its (white male) protagonist, based on his experience of stalking, harassment, rape and sexual assault, is Netflix’s tenth most-watched English-language series of all time.<sup>12</sup>

The problem and solution is money. Within and across a coalition of anti-trafficking organisations, USD 20 million could be spent on:

- 1) Advocating for, training, and collaborating with the television and film industry to produce authentic, accurate portrayals of human trafficking and its intersecting issues, because of the indisputable impact of storytelling in popular culture in cultivating empathy for others and social change. In the long term, this means greater access, resources, and opportunities for BIPOC survivors to get their stories in front of the public.
- 2) Hiring communications, research, and policy experts who understand human trafficking to craft and amplify accurate, digestible messages about it. Many organisations already do this but need to evolve with changing media trends such as social media, which many young people turn to for news and education. To promote their work, many human trafficking organisations use sensational language and tired clichés about ‘rescuing’ and ‘saving’ victims. It is up to those working directly with survivors to forge new, accurate, norm-setting messages about human trafficking that do no harm.
- 3) Training journalists on how to make their human trafficking and related reporting ethical and more impactful, because of the media’s influence on public opinion. Drawing on survivor-led messages, media outlets need training and ongoing technical assistance in navigating our complex issues

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<sup>12</sup> S Hailu, ‘Netflix Top 10: “Baby Reindeer” Becomes No. 10 Biggest English-Language Series Ever, “Under Paris” Scores Massive Debut’, *Variety*, 11 June 2024, <https://variety.com/2024/tv/news/netflix-top-10-streaming-ratings-3-1236041392>.

without peddling stereotypes. Some have already started this work, but it deserves substantial, committed financial investment.

All this work must be informed or ideally led by survivors, who must be properly paid for sharing their lived experiences and expertise.

These three ideas alone could reach tens of millions of Americans, catalysing many human trafficking organisations' missions by mobilising citizens and influencing public policy.<sup>13</sup> In turn, this could lead to changes in the interests and giving behaviour of funders of all kinds, as was seen in the revived popularity of racial justice funding in the US in 2020 and beyond, albeit imperfect and insufficient. Paradoxically, many public and private funders in the US will only fund tangible, direct services for survivors of human trafficking and are less moved by narrative change or communications projects designed to raise awareness. However, if done well, we could potentially increase the volume of funds for survivor services by reaching the general public with authentic and accurate narratives, and maybe even move the needle on trafficking prevention. More and more people will see themselves in these stories and come forward for help, and decisionmakers will be better informed about how and where to address trafficking. Survivors will feel seen and validated.

None of this is new to those working in this movement. We all encounter misapprehensions about our work every day. This is not easily solved, but successfully deploying issue-based storytelling is a well-documented tool for social justice movements. Those of us in human trafficking nonprofits are nobly chasing funds to keep our doors open, leaving little room for creative endeavours, even though, by potentially reaching millions, uncertainty about funding could be reduced. Too few funders currently want to finance narrative change work, even though their stated goal is helping organisations like my own to achieve their missions of ending human trafficking.

This is why I would spend the USD 20 million on long-term narrative change work under the leadership of survivors, including film and media programmes that would amplify our movement's collective expertise and call people and funders into our cause. It would inform a curious public about the realities of human trafficking, and what needs to be done to end it.

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<sup>13</sup> D Whiteman, 'Reel Impact: How Nonprofits Harness the Power of Documentary Film', *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, vol. 1, issue 1, Spring 2023, pp. 60–63, <https://doi.org/10.48558/PY4Q-MT02>.

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