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# Human Trafficking and Racial Justice

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Consistent [waves of media](#) cover the issue of human trafficking, and it's attained a fairly mainstream level of attention. So much so that January is now known as [National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month](#), or as [Human Trafficking Awareness Month](#). More people are learning about trafficking and understand it involves people in vulnerable situations experiencing coercion in their work. At its most basic, trafficking is about people living and working in a climate of fear, [not free to leave](#) exploitative and dangerous working conditions.

But even as there is greater understanding of these issues of coercion, there is still a basic confusion over how to describe trafficking, and how to convey the experiences of victims and survivors. In an effort to simplify, trafficking is often described as "slavery," bringing to mind, for many, the experience of American slavery. In fact, the [Presidential proclamation](#) on trafficking uses the language and descriptions of slavery.

Such talk of slavery is largely well-intended, but it's historically inaccurate, diminishes the experiences of people and families who've experienced enslavement, and creates more confusion than clarity. Gender rights advocate [Melissa Ditmore](#), progressive policy expert [Ross Mudrick](#), and I recently described the differences between slavery and trafficking in a forthcoming report on the U.S. anti-trafficking landscape for [NEO Philanthropy](#):

Throughout American history, involuntary labor has been implemented through various means, including force, threats, coercion, fraud, and physical/sexual assault, and is older than the United States itself. Forms of forced labor have taken place within our borders since the founding of our country, including slavery, the transition from slavery to prison labor, peonage, debt bondage, and more recently, trafficking in persons. The dynamic has always been, in one form or another, racialized, gendered, and abusive of people in vulnerable economic situations. And the previous notion of indenture was ostensibly time-bound and, like trafficking today, often linked to migration.

But there are crucial distinctions: Slavery as we commonly and historically understand it was an enslaved status legally designed to be passed down to the next generation, and it was embedded in founding American documents, while other forms of involuntary labor were not. In fact today, trafficking is specifically declared unlawful. Contemporary discourse around trafficking has often included language around abolition, slavery, and liberation, but almost always without the necessary analysis on racial justice and African-American history that would truly illuminate this issue and respect the impact of the history of American slavery.

One way [the legacy of slavery](#) plays out in trafficking situations today is that jobs that were historically performed by enslaved or formerly enslaved people, like [restaurant, agricultural, and domestic work](#), were, and continue to be, specifically excluded from labor protections. Because there is less legal protection, these are some of the most common sectors where trafficking now takes place.

And given the culture of over-policing and police abuse in communities of color, especially Black communities, it's disingenuous to speak out against trafficking while supporting [raids and arrests of sex workers](#), who are already [heavily policed and afraid of law enforcement](#). It's no surprise that such arrests [disproportionately affect](#) sex workers of color. It is particularly dangerous when some groups ramp up fear of trafficking with talk of "pimps" and "pimp culture," invoking tired and negative stereotypes about young Black men.

We are in a major moment of cultural awareness and [collective action](#), led by Black Lives Matter and others around police abuse and [lethal force by law enforcement](#) (in both the immigration and traditional criminal justice systems). The moment makes it absolutely clear that anti-trafficking work must speak directly to issues of racial justice, including the ways it intersects with economic opportunity, the criminal justice system, immigration policy, and racial bias generally. As we honor Martin Luther King, Jr., and celebrate MLK Day this month, activists from the [Movement for Black Lives](#) are engaged in a [#ReclaimMLK](#) campaign focused on removing barriers in [economic policy and the](#)

criminal justice system. Given how central economic opportunity and freedom from abuse within the criminal justice system are for survivors of human trafficking, these issues are a natural entry point for anti-trafficking advocates to engage in collaboration and building a shared vision for the kind of world we all want, need, and deserve to live in.

A truly modern and relevant anti-trafficking agenda will continue to focus on getting rid of coercion and exploitative work environments, but it must also include explicit goals to end over-policing, arrest of sex workers, profiling of and violence against trans women, dangerous immigrant detention and deportation practices, and discrimination in the criminal justice system. These are the ways we honor the memories and experiences of people who experienced and survived slavery, and keep moving forward to end trafficking today.

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