



Beyond Trafficking and Slavery

opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
openDemocracy
free thinking for the world 

Press release

11th of January 2017

Launching a public debate on Human Trafficking awareness campaigns: Do the hidden costs outweigh the practical benefits?

Ten of the world's leading authorities on human trafficking and modern slavery have written contributions to an online debate to be published on [National US Human Trafficking Awareness Day](#), Wednesday the 11th of January, 2017 on opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery.

The debate will kick off an important public dialogue between civil society activists and government officials regarding the strengths and weaknesses of strategies for raising awareness of human trafficking. While not all campaigns share similar motivations or target audiences, many campaigns share key features. These include an emphasis on stories of individual suffering, dramatic statistics and sensational images, and the increasing role of celebrities as public champions. While these campaigns increase public awareness, there are also growing concerns that too many anti-trafficking campaigns provide inaccurate and unhelpful pictures of the core issues at stake. How much do these kinds of problems matter? Campaigns to raise public awareness may have their flaws, but aren't these flaws forgivable when campaigns seek to advance a worthy cause?

The debate is convened by two leading academics in the field of human trafficking and modern slavery: Dr. Elena Shih, Brown University, and Dr. Joel Quirk, University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa). Dr. Shih and Dr. Quirk are Editors of the *Beyond Trafficking and Slavery* section of openDemocracy.net, a London-based global digital commons with over nine million readers.

The debate is co-sponsored by openDemocracy, Brown University's Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice, and Yale University's Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance & Abolition (information below).

Participants include:

Katherine Chon, Director of the [Office on Trafficking in Persons](#), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Joanna Ewart-James, Advocacy Director at [WalkFree](#).

David Feingold, Director of the [Ophidian Research Institute](#).

Matthew Friedman, Chief Executive Officer for [The Mekong Club](#).

Sameera Hafiz, Advocacy Director at [National Domestic Workers Alliance](#).

Ima Matul, Survivor of Human Trafficking, Survivor Coordinator of [National Survivor Network](#) (USA).

Anne Elizabeth Moore, award-winning journalist and author of [Threadbare: Clothes, Sex & Trafficking](#)

Marilyn Murray, Creative Director at [Love146](#).

Cris Sardina, Director of [Desiree Alliance](#).

Zoe Trodd, Co-Director of the [Research Priority Area in Rights and Justice](#), University of Nottingham

The debate format will involve a first round of statements from participants published between the 11th and 16th of January, followed by a second round of contributions to be published in February.

Background:

Campaigners, activists, and government officials spend much of their time and energy crafting messages that are designed to win specific audiences over to their cause. The main goal behind these messages is to raise awareness of specific problems or issues, and to offer target audiences potential solutions or remedies. In the case of human trafficking awareness campaigns, which are our subject for debate, recent initiatives include the [Blue Heart Campaign](#) as an ‘international symbol against human trafficking’; media reports instructing people to ‘[spot the signs](#)’ of trafficking and slavery in locations such as [airports](#), [nail salons](#), or [hospitals](#); numerous [public marches](#) under banners such as ‘[walk for freedom](#)’ or ‘[tasting freedom](#)’. These campaigns are also not confined to civil society, but regularly include governments and international organizations. In 2010, the United States Senate designated January 11th Human Trafficking Awareness Day, which was later expanded to awareness month in 2011. This policy debate takes this National Day as an opportunity to reflect on the benefits and costs of raising awareness campaigns.

Defenders of public awareness campaigns have few doubts that their efforts have a positive impact by disseminating essential information. They accept that some things might be improved, but regard improvements as mere refinements within a legitimate and valuable project to inspire action and increase funding and awareness about human trafficking. By contrast, many critics of public awareness campaigns—or at least mainstream anti-trafficking campaigns—instead argue that campaigns inflict collateral damage to communities excluded from or targeted by human trafficking policies, including many sex workers, domestic workers, and garment factory workers globally. These critics maintain that the funds raised are too often wasted on superficial interventions that exclude systematic political and economic causes of exploitation and vulnerability. When all is said and done, are these public awareness campaigns helping or hurting?

Collaborating Organizations:

Based at [Brown University](#), the [Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice](#) (CSSJ) is a scholarly research center with a public humanities mission. Recognizing that racial and chattel slavery were central to the historical formation of the Americas and the modern world, the CSSJ creates a space for the interdisciplinary study of the historical forms of slavery while also examining how these legacies continue to shape our contemporary world.

Based at [Yale University](#), the [Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition](#) strives to make a vital contribution to the understanding of slavery and its role in the development of the modern world. While the Center's primary focus has been on scholarly research, it also seeks to bridge the divide between scholarship and public knowledge by opening channels of communication between the scholarly community and the wider public. This debate forms part of a new project on global supply chains and labor exploitation.

[Beyond Trafficking and Slavery](#) is an editorial partnership with [openDemocracy](#), a UK-based digital commons with an annual readership of over nine million. The primary goal of this partnership is to better understand and effectively challenge the political, economic, and social root causes of global exploitation, vulnerability and forced labor. Beyond Slavery combines the rigor of academic scholarship with the clarity of journalism and the immediacy of political activism.

Contacts for Further Information:

Dr. Elena Shih: elena_shih@brown.edu / [@uhlenna](#)/ +1 401 863 9740

Dr. Joel Quirk: joel.quirk@wits.ac.za / [@joelquirk](#) / +27 781 353049