

Reframe Health and Justice

Sex Workers' rights and Human Trafficking

[https://reframehealthandjustice.medium.com/whos-aware-of-human-trafficking-qanon-4ce80f308757?](https://reframehealthandjustice.medium.com/whos-aware-of-human-trafficking-qanon-4ce80f308757?readmore=1&source=user_profile-----2-----)

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Campaign and Advocacy

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by Kate DAdamo, Partner at Reframe Health and Justice

Today is January 11, Human Trafficking Awareness Day. Department of Homeland Security tells us all to [wear blue and take selfies](#), many organizations sent out fundraising blasts for you to prove awareness, and for-profit companies will make some acknowledgement of the words human trafficking to show they are aware.

But this year should be different. We have spent four years learning just how much the horrors of white supremacy, racialized violence, domestic terror, homophobia, violent misogyny, police violence and murder are woven into the fabric of our day to day lives. There has never been a moment more ripe for critical self-reflection in modern US history. Social justice movements, especially those with ties to the state, have an opportunity to look at where we are, look at where we have come from, and make important decisions about where we are going. And on a day asking the world to be aware of human trafficking, the field has an opportunity to engage in a very serious moment of self-reflection on a painful and glaring question.

Why did the same QAnon supporters who left pipe bombs at the Capitol and who have been promoting white nationalism and terrorism choose sex trafficking as a rallying cry?

As [described by the New York Times](#), QAnon is the umbrella term for a sprawling set of internet conspiracy theories that allege, falsely, that the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who are plotting against Mr. Trump while operating a global child sex-trafficking ring. Over the last several months, [QAnon adopted sex trafficking as an issue](#), galvanizing members and bringing out supporters, even to prominent anti-trafficking organizations pleading them to stop. But while [anti-trafficking groups from across the ideological spectrum](#) fought this usage, the practice has even made its way into the efforts to derail the election results being certified while walking through the airport, Republican Senator Lindsay Graham was met with a screaming crowd who included in their screaming the claim that he was a sex trafficker.

It would be easy to say that QAnon simply picked a popular issue but this glosses over a far starker reality that the values embodied by the most prominent anti-trafficking narratives are the same as the values held by QAnon.

Unambiguous Moral Superiority

QAnon does not do well with nuance. While their ideological foundation is a big tent of conspiracy theories, all of these display a similarly concrete and binary understanding of good versus evil, and they are always on the side of good.

Conspiracy theories, by nature, are complex in form but reductive in ethical consideration. According to theorist [Jovan Byford](#), conspiratorial explanations have taken the form of complex tales of secret identities, covert plans and arcane knowledge weaved into the classic morality tale about the battle between Good and Evil. The nature of conspiracies rest on the core of good versus evil, and its only natural for other stories which mirror this core to be attractive.

QAnons conspiracy theories are no different, portraying a blanket good versus evil narrative. One professor of religion who had studied the groups rhetoric found [thousands of deployments of rhetoric around evil](#);

For example, in an Aug. 10, 2018, Qdrop titled Many in Power Worship the Devil, Q states: PURE EVIL. HOW MANY IN WASHINGTON AND THOSE AROUND THE WORLD (IN POWER) WORSHIP THE DEVIL?

On Aug. 26, 2020, Q posted an image suggesting that the 2020 Democratic National Convention logo resembled a [Satanic Baphomet pentagram](#), which incorporates a goats head and a five-pointed star. Accompanying text asserts that one party Republicans discusses God while the other party Democrats discusses darkness.

Cue every depiction of trafficking, which use a perfect victim narrative to portray innocence being preyed upon by a network of conspiring evil-doers. Articles on human trafficking regularly describe those charged, or even simply part of the same raid, as evil. For their 2021 proclamation, one state-based Task Force stated this dichotomy as During National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, we reaffirm our commitment to eradicate this abhorrent evil, to support victims and survivors, and to hold traffickers accountable for their heinous crimes. In Florida, Palm Beach County State Attorney Dave Aronberg held a press conference stating, We have individuals who are predators, who are preying upon young people, who are unsuspected Its true evil in our midst. Trafficking is

exclusively evil, and trafficker has become a stand-in for the term.

On the other side of this coin is the narrative of a perfect victim, embodied by exclusive innocence and ignorance, displayed in the storytelling of NGOs and law enforcement alike. Floridas most recent sting operation was titled, Operation Stolen Innocence. This is despite numerous advocates discussing how these flat understandings of innocence and perfection cause incredible harm to the same individuals. This myth of the perfect victim has real implications for how our clients are treated by law enforcement and service providers, [said advocate Bridgette Carr](#).

Lost are the conversations on the root causes which cause people to be vulnerable to abuse or the very problematic dichotomy of the criminal-legal system. It means that people being victimized are regularly arrested and traumatized by law enforcement and post-conviction relief can be hard to come by, as policymakers are told that prosecutors dont make those mistakes- they know victims when they see them. The manifestation of evil is an unambiguous picture of a trafficker who preys on innocence, and a dichotomy which is at home in a QAnon universe of hero versus villain.

If QAnon see Democrats and the Deep State as the embodiment of evil, and if sex trafficking is the manifestation of pure evil, then there must be a connection between the two.

Celebration of the Vigilante who employs Violence

It is not simply enough for these conspiracy theorists to recognize good versus evil, but also to act. For QAnon, hashtags like #SavetheChildren became a rallying cry to bring people out to meetings and encouraged them to share their cause with others, and eventually hashtags like #StoptheSteal moved people to converge on the Capitol. Another important part of the story is that good will prevail with individual do-gooders making the decision to act and anti-trafficking is full of those stories save and stop are not ideas to grasp, but verbs, and calls to act.

Trigger warning: I cant read the articles linked and not be triggered around sexual violence, so please make your own choice on the following paragraphs.

The most prominent example of an anti-trafficking white savior vigilante is Nick Kristof, who has made it his calling to force his will on women of color who participate in the sex trade. In 2004 Kristof [literally bought two young women](#) (his choice of phrasing, not mine I decided to buy two teenage prostitutes) from a brothel in Cambodia. This was despite protests from the young women themselves, one of whom began to cry and locked herself in a room to get away from him. He followed that stunt up by [live-tweeting a brothel raid](#) he participated in, and most recently by working with Christian evangelical and pro-exploitation of sex workers organization Exodus Cry to take down Pornhub. In each story, he is the single figure of saviorism, and those impacted are props at best, and actively trying to hide from him at most its most disturbing. Sadly, anti-trafficking advocates have either remained quiet or in some cases have celebrated him and his exploitative violations.

But this kind of vigilantism is not a one-off, but instead a style of practice, where sometimes it seems like a race to who can be the friendlier vigilante. Only a few years ago, the Attorney General for Utah [participated in a sting operation](#) which involved flying to Colombia after paying someone to arrange encounters with young people for commercial sex a tactic which *encourages* third parties to identify and seek out children and young people, instead of dissuade the practice. The organization which spearheaded this has been [lauded in media](#) for years, with [extensive fundraising efforts](#) in support of their raid and rescue tactics. Now the organization which orchestrated these efforts abroad, Operation Underground Railroad, [is under investigation](#) for false claims of their work by the same state who sent their AG to join OUR in Colombia. They have even [been called out by actors like Dominique Roe-Sepowitz](#), who orchestrated her own raid by [collaborating with police to encourage profiling and arrest of sex workers](#) in order to force them into her own program, Project Rose. These tactics arent grounded in human rights, but instead a fight for who is the best savior, all the while ignoring the dignity of the people who they act upon.

The narrative of taking on evil by your own volition is the exact same spark which catalyzed the attack on the Capitol on Wednesday. President Trumps own words underscore this drive, as at the rally just before he proclaimed, youll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength. The title of the event, March to Save America, was bolstered by cries such as stop the steal, and claims such as [The fate of our nation depends on it](#).

Stories such as Kristofs and OURs Tim Ballards that it takes the work of singular, driven (white) individuals to take action in the face of evil. [One of the domestic terrorists who invaded Nancy Pelosis office recently raised \\$1,000 for OUR](#). Live-tweeting and promoting stories which center the savior committing acts of physical and emotional violence is a central part of the mainstream trafficking narrative, and it would only be natural for the same individuals who see vigilantes like Ballard as heroes to play out their own story of saviorism and vigilantism.

White Supremacy and Xenophobia

There is no glossing over the fact that the same groups who invaded the Capitol carrying Confederate flags are attracted to a story about ending modern-day slavery. From the outset of what is now referred to as anti-trafficking, there has been an active co-optation of slavery language and imagery through terms like white slavery or modern-day slavery. This rhetoric is rooted in diminishing the impact of chattel slavery, erasing the failure of reconstruction, positioning white people as the heroes and saviors, undermining the resistance of Black folks who were held in bondage, and erasing the shift of violent racial oppression and exploitation from chattel slavery to the criminal-legal system and resulting mass incarceration. As not all of QAnon followers describe themselves as white supremacists, dog whistles like this are especially important. A QAnon follower may not want to explicitly promote their racial politics, so it is far easier to parrot racialized stories of evil reported as fact. Anti-trafficking stories and imagery remain racialized, and public awareness, often reaffirms our stories of men of color instead of an understanding of anti-trafficking.

When you see this picture, posted with the title [January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month!](#) what are you learning?

Anti-trafficking efforts both in the US and abroad have been critiqued for their anti-immigration impacts. While many anti-trafficking

organizations are focused on serving immigrants and migrants specifically, the law enforcement focus on foreign nationals regularly results in deportations when people are not easily identified as victims of trafficking [or even if they are](#). In the last four years [visas for trafficking victims have stalled or dropped, and ICE has been decried for targeting victims of violence](#). Sex workers have regularly spoken out about how anti-trafficking raids are meant to [identify migrants for deportation](#) not trafficking relief. Even in the very first domestic trafficking law, the White Slave Traffic Act/Mann Act, one of the biggest debates in Congress was over a provision which required brothel owners to report migrants who sought work, and how to extend immunity to those owners. If the only downside of these violent raids portrayed is to deport people here irregularly, whats the problem?

The racialized nature of trafficking narratives is a long and storied history, but its tales about who is a victim, who is a perpetrator, and who needs to be expelled from the country is strong enough for these narratives to carry resonance for those steeped in white nationalism.

A Chance to Pivot

Anti-trafficking narratives being attractive to groups like QAnon should surprise no one. The truth of human trafficking is that it is structural marginalization which creates exploitable vulnerability and only community investment and serious redistribution of power and resources will cause real change. But thats not the easiest to sell narrative. Anti-trafficking efforts in media, fundraising, description and policy should reflect the values of human rights, liberation and ending structural oppression, not the easy story of rescue. The short-term gains made by using these easy, heart-aching stories of good and evil are not worth the long-term retrenchment of oppression. [Advocates and organizations signed a letter denouncing the QAnon conspiracy theories to lawmakers](#), but that was clearly not enough. When some of your most ardent supporters are expressing and committing violence while enacting some of your worst nightmares, it should be a moment to pause and wonder what they see in you, and whether what they see is the image you really want to project.

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