

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/beyond-innocence/preconceived-notions-of-innocence-are-a-disservice-to-trafficking-victims-1>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

When speaking about human trafficking to audiences, I often ask them to describe their idea of a victim. I regularly hear the same tropes that dominate media and popular dialogue: cisgendered women (those who identify as the gender they were assigned at birth), naive and lacking agency, who experience trafficking as an isolated disruption from an otherwise idyllic life. In essence, they are manifestations of innocence.

But these narratives often fail to recognize the nuances and complexities of a person who has experienced a trafficking situation. And by failing to see these nuances, there is risk that a victim will be ignored by his or her community and the people best positioned to help.

I find that the stories of the victims with whom I have the privilege to work first as a community organizer for folks in the sex trade and now at the Sex Workers Project do not resemble the innocent victim described by audience members. These real victims are complex and powerful people whose lives started long before their trafficking experiences and will continue long after. Their stories are always far more complicated than simply innocent or not.

It is in these nuances that so much about trafficking and trafficking experiences can be learned, like how an undocumented status kept someone from reaching out for help when forced to do domestic labor. Or how a trans victim traded sex for the shelter their family and the city would or could not provide. Or that a history of arrests meant that no one could see beyond a victim's criminal record and reconcile the person in front of them with preconceived ideas of a victim.

We learn that these characteristics meant that even when a victim did reach out and actively sought services or support, the strength essential to their survival meant missing out on visas, benefits, or services at all.

Trafficking is not an identity, but an experience, one of many and often only an episode in a larger life story. Defining a person solely as a trafficking victim erases his or her existence before and after that singular experience, forever associating him or her with this event and only in relationship to his or her trafficker.

For people involved in sex work, the experiences of trading sex form a constellation. Many people will move in and out of trading sex under different circumstances that reflect the changes in their lives. Involvement in the sex trade can be one of many ways in which people survive before, during, and after an exploitative situation. Trading sex can also lead to justice system involvement in multiple ways that may make the same person both a victim and a criminal. Many of those who have been in trafficking situations may have traded sex before or after that experience, carrying complicated arrest records thus blurring the line between what constitutes victim and perpetrator, when the line should have never existed at all.

Personal ideas of innocence and victimization say more about the person that holds them than they do about the real victim standing before them. The strength a person shows in how they are able to survive against incredible challenges should not convince us that they are not in need of justice or services. It should inspire us to challenge our own notions of deserving and not.

The [Beyond Innocence](#) blog series explores the limitations posed by existing frameworks and points to ways forward that better uphold the values of equity, public safety, and human dignity.

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