

# Slavery by Another Name:

## The Epidemic of Black Female Trafficking Victims in the US and Abroad



[www.ibwppi.org](http://www.ibwppi.org) | 504 Fair Street, SW, Atlanta, GA 30313 | 202-383-9157

## **Message from the President**

From the Transatlantic Slave Trade to modern-day slavery, the commodification and over-sexualization of Black women and girls have been a persistent global phenomenon for centuries. In present-day times, women and girls from the African diaspora are more likely to be trafficked as they represent 40 percent of sex trafficking victims within the United States, according to the Justice Department. This is a humanitarian crisis at seismic proportions, and it calls for mass action.

The issue of invisibility predominantly affects Black women and girls as our missing girls often do not get mainstream media attention, are excluded from public outreach campaigns, and are usually not accurately reflected in the data.

Given 40 % of sex trafficking victims are Black women and girls, hence, it is imperative that strong voices are advocating for meaningful policy changes that addresses their vulnerability due to being impoverished, lacking permanent housing or job skills, or transitioning out of the foster care system.

IBWPPI is concerned about the following:

- Culturally competent service providers provide housing, drug treatment services, counseling, and educational and employment opportunities.
- The criminalization of trafficking victims under the age of 18 years old.
- Appropriate data collection to better understand the scope of the problem and why this issue disproportionately affects women of the African diaspora in the United States and worldwide.

We hope this position paper will serve as a call to action for public members to join the International Black Women in Public Policy Institute's fight to raise awareness and support policies that will protect not only our women and girls but all victims of human trafficking. We stand ready to work with members of Congress, international organizations, community-based groups, and concerned citizens in eradicating human trafficking and addressing major threats to the well-being of black women and girls.

Barbara Perkins

Co-Founder and President, International Black Women in Public Policy Institute

## **Slavery by Another Name: The Epidemic of Black Female Trafficking Victims in the United States and Abroad**

In 1865, America sought to officially abolish slavery and involuntary servitude in the United States by ratifying the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. However, slavery has made a comeback, and in 2019, it is a global crisis. The new version of slavery does not focus on race or gender specific, but on the most vulnerable of society. Economic opportunities, friendships or relationships can leave individuals robbed of their freedom and basic human dignity. Human trafficking, or modern-day slavery uses force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some labor or commercial sex act and too many times, black women and girls fall victim.<sup>1</sup> As women and members of the African diaspora, we must speak up for our women and girls. As members of the global community, we must seek to create ongoing policy initiatives that restore lives and achieve justice for survivors of human trafficking in the U.S. and abroad.

In the United States, there more than 600,000 to 800,000 people are being trafficked annually across international borders.<sup>2</sup> According to the Department of Justice, women and girls from the African diaspora are more likely to be trafficked as they represent 40 percent of sex trafficking victims.- In comparison, Caucasians represent 25.6 percent of sex trafficking victims, followed by Hispanics at 23.9 percent, Asians at 4.3 percent and others at 5.8 percent.<sup>3</sup> Most Americans would not imagine that victims living in this underground world of sexual exploitation would look like our daughters, sisters, mothers, and aunts. Still, the truth is, anyone can become a target. Victims are in our schools, places of worship, malls, and neighborhoods, trapped in an endless cycle of despair.

The sex trafficking network is global, coordinated, and complicated. The State Department reports there are 24.9 million modern-day slaves in the world.<sup>4</sup> Victims are sometimes hidden and removed from day-to-day society, and therefore, it is believed that the number of victims in the U.S. is greater.

The U.S. Congress passed *The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000* (Public Law 106- 386). The law was the first comprehensive human trafficking law and involved a three-pronged approach which included prevention, protection, and prosecution.<sup>5</sup> On January 8, 2019, Congress passed *The Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act* (Public Law 115-425) in honor of former enslaved

abolitionist Frederick Douglas's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday. It reauthorizes \$430 million in funds to ensure the government takes an integrated, holistic approach to fight human trafficking for the next four years.<sup>6</sup>

The International Black Women's Public Policy Institute (IBWPPI) abhors all forms of human trafficking and supports policy solutions that restore victim's human rights. As the only global public policy institute founded and dedicated to black women, we are especially concerned about the trafficking of black women and girls. We aim to evaluate the impact of current public policy, national and international, and initiate or support new guidelines that address major threats to the well-being of black women, their families, and communities.

The International Black Women's Public Policy Institute tracks and supports legislation aimed at the elimination of human trafficking. We have testified before state legislatures and the U.S. Congress on the need for legislative changes. We have sponsored forums, town hall meetings, workshops, and events to bring awareness to the issue and raised funds to aid and assist victims in need of support. We urgently need more victim-centered, trauma-focused support services led by culturally competent service providers and stand ready to support state, local, federal, and international leaders eager to find solutions.

### **Combatting Myths Associated with Sex Trafficking**

We can all help end trafficking, but first, we must know the truth and the myths surrounding the topic. Misinformation about sex trafficking keeps them trapped and enslaved.

**1. Sex trafficking of under-aged children mainly happens overseas.** Children are being forced into sexual exploitation every single day in the United States. Sex trafficking is happening in unsuspecting places like middle schools, high schools, parks, community centers, malls, and believe it or not, churches. Runaways or foster children are sometimes lured by traffickers who offer them food and a home in exchange for sex. Gay or transgender youth who become homeless after their families reject them subsequently become vulnerable to sex traffickers.

**2. Traffickers are only organized gangs or criminals.** A trafficker can work alone or with others. A trafficker can look like an ordinary, upstanding individual. Traffickers are both

males and females, young or old persons who are intentional about taking advantage of the most vulnerable among us. Traffickers are often charming manipulators that give the appearance of being kind, compassionate, and sophisticated.

**3. Victims are always forced into the life.** Many victims, particularly those over 18 years old, initially agree to relationships that appear to be safe and trustworthy. Once seduced by the external trappings of a better life, they find it too difficult to leave.

**4. This happens to women who are in the wrong place at the wrong time.** Victims come from all walks of life, and youth are especially vulnerable to falling into the vicious cycle of sex trafficking. In this digital era, human trafficking is taking place online and on social media platforms. Children and young adults are being lured online and often unknowingly trafficked by traffickers from their very bedrooms.

**5. Families are unaware of the dangers of childhood sexual exploitation.** Sadly, far too many children are introduced to a life of sexual exploitation by members of their own families.

### **Drawing an Analysis Between the Modern-Day Slave Trade and the Transatlantic Slave Trade**

Early views formed about the African people during the Transatlantic Slave Trade continue to influence and shape modern beliefs, and the level of interest given when black women and girls are victimized in today's society. In 2017, *the Grio* ran "Black Women and Girls are Missing, and No One Seems to Care,"<sup>7</sup> followed by multiple media outlets such as *Essence*<sup>8</sup> and *Teen Vogue*<sup>9</sup>, publishing articles highlighting the public and media's disinterest in missing black women and girls. Lack of media coverage guarantees these girls will not be found and makes their lives seem less valuable.

The commodification of black women has been a persistent issue since the days of chattel slavery. The over-sexualization of black bodies has prevailed in our culture for centuries and is rooted in European imperialist ideology. Historians have found that dramatized stories from European explorers who visited Africa depicted black women as hypersexualized and uncivilized. According to Caren Holmes of the College of Wooster, "Social Darwinist theory during this time suggested that the sexual inferiority of black people was an innate result of black evolutionary defectiveness. The pseudo-

science and social Darwinist beliefs surrounding black female sexuality contributed to the dehumanization of black women in colonial American society.”<sup>10</sup>

The over-sexualization of black women and girls harkens back to the days of the slave trade and the auction block, a space where African women were put on public display in full view for white men to bid and purchase their bodies. Once in captivity, slave owners raped, abused, and victimized black women as they were seen as innately lustful beings. From slavery to present-day mainstream media, these norms have been reinforced and filled the consciousness of media consumers.<sup>11</sup>

There are more people enslaved now than in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. From the 1500s to the 1800s, 9.9 million Africans were transported to the New World, compared to the 27 million people living in bondage today.<sup>12</sup> In the fight against human trafficking, we must reclaim our dignities, our bodies, and our lives. Black women should be seen as full human beings who are worthy of respect, media coverage, and care.

### **The State of Human Trafficking for Black Women and Girls in the US**

The sexual exploitation of women and girls is currently a multi-billion-dollar illegal business operating in major cities in the United States. According to a 2016 *Los Angeles Sentinel* article, “Black Girls and Sex Trafficking in Los Angeles!” a pimp “is likely to earn \$150,000 to \$300,000 thousand each year selling and exploiting the bodies of teenage black girls.” A major risk factor that puts black girls at greater risk of being recruited as sex workers is the vulnerability of that population. They are more likely to be from socially identified high-risk neighborhoods and are more likely to be poor, uneducated, lacking job skills and strong social networks. “The average pimp has four to six girls, and many are ages 13-14. These young ladies are raped, beaten, branded, contract sexually transmitted diseases within six months of being on the streets and sold daily in the sex trade.”<sup>13</sup> These young women are also forced to participate in drug use to distort their thinking and encourage dependence.

Runaway girls, as young as 13 to 17 years old, are mainly targeted for trafficking by having their basic needs met in exchange for sex. The National Runaway Safeline reported that it “noticed a disturbing and consistent increase in reliance on the sex industry for survival over the past two (13% increase), five (36%), and ten years (100%).”<sup>14</sup> Many have

been recently emancipated from the foster care system. They become prey for street pimps and those, often other young girls, who assist pimps for financial gain.

In an effort to protect sex trafficking victims and those at risk in the foster care system at the state level, U.S. Representative Dave Camp of Michigan, introduced H.R. 4980, *Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act* (Public Law 113-184). The law mandates “the state agency has developed policies and procedures for identifying, documenting in agency records, and determining appropriate services with respect to, any child or youth over whom the state agency has responsibility for placement, care, or supervision who the state has reasonable cause to believe is, or is at risk of being, a victim of sex trafficking or a severe form of trafficking in persons.”<sup>15</sup> Congress passed this landmark legislation that will require representatives in the child welfare system to protect children’s safety, properly report sex trafficking victims, and provide specialized services for survivors.

Federal law states that there is no such thing as a child prostitute, and states like California have led the charge in creating statewide protections for child sex trafficking victims. California passed a statewide law that bans the arrests of juveniles under 18 years of age. Introduced by California State Senator Holly Mitchell and signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown, SB 1322 decriminalizes underage prostitution soliciting or engaging in prostitution or loitering with the intent to do so. It instead mandates that law enforcement and judges treat them as victims and place them with the Department of Social Services.<sup>16</sup> More has to be done in ensuring that all 50 states ban juvenile prostitution arrests and divert victims into social services programs.

### **The State of Human Trafficking for Black Women and Girls on a Global Level**

The International Labor Organization estimates that the human sex trafficking industry generates an estimated \$150 billion in revenues.<sup>17</sup> This exploitative system sadly profits off the welfare, stolen dignities, and systemic abuses of its victims, many of whom are women and girls.

The invisibility of black women and girls in the international human trafficking conversation is alarming, and there is a need for a global assessment for this population. While the crisis of human trafficking persists in impoverished nations and has been documented, the

question remains how large is the scope of the problem for black women and girls globally; and how do they fare against other racial and ethnic groups? Policymakers and advocates should examine what policies would be effectively reverse negative trends for the world's most vulnerable populations, considering other systems of oppression like racism and discrimination.

### ***Gaps in Data for the Global Human Trafficking Crisis***

The international community has developed a better understanding and coordinated response to the human trafficking epidemic, however, the complete picture has not been painted. With all the available research and the coordinated efforts between governments, multilateral organizations, NGOs, researchers, academics, international organizations, and advocates, the data is disparate for human trafficking victims of African descent by continent and nation. Even within the U.S., many of our largest, most well-funded human trafficking organizations and agencies do not track data by ethnicity or race.

When studying cross-border flows of trafficking victims, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found long-distance trafficking of African victims to countries in Europe and North America and the trafficking of Latin Americans to North America and Europe to be significant. UNODC noted the inconsistencies about how trafficking victims were accounted for in different countries. Many countries do not have primary data on trafficking persons, and if they do, some countries will account for the number of trafficking victims, but they do not track demographic data such as age, gender, or citizenship status.<sup>18</sup>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime stated that member states needed to collect more detailed information on trafficking victims. Until they do so, the question remains just how big the human trafficking problem is globally. Ultimately there is a need to have better-coordinated information systems to aid in collective information gathering that will support strategic interventions.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Global Interventions and Legal Solutions***

Despite the gaps in data, the United Nations has taken actions to advance the fight against human trafficking by aligning it to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030. The Inter-Agency Coordinating Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) is a policy forum mandated by the UN General Assembly to improve coordination among UN agencies



and other relevant agencies to ensure there is a holistic and comprehensive approach to combatting human trafficking.<sup>19</sup>

In November 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons* to supplement the *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*. This overarching legal framework helps member states more effectively prosecute cases of sexual and labor exploitation. The international instrument passed by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) was created for the prevention, suppression, and trafficking of persons. It is the only universal legal instrument of its kind that takes a comprehensive and integrated approach to reduce the human trafficking crisis. According to OHCHR, the purpose of the protocol is to “prevent and combat trafficking in persons, paying particular attention to women and children; to protect and assist the victims of such trafficking, with full respect for their human rights; and to promote cooperation among States Parties in order to meet those objectives.”<sup>20</sup>

These are helpful remedies for this global human crisis as many member states have signed on and ratified it. However, translating it into a reality is a struggle as international legal systems are complex and varied. Various ministries handle human, and labor trafficking cases and the lack of inter-governmental coordination can create gaps in identifying and prosecuting cases.<sup>21</sup>

### **IBWPPI’s Work to Advance the Fight Against Human Trafficking**

Months after President Obama signed legislation that renewed the nation’s most important tool to fight modern-day slavery, the *Trafficking Victims Protection Act - Title XII of the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013* (Public Law 113-4). In March 7, 2013, the IBWPPI voted to spend the following two years helping to bring awareness to communities in cities that had the highest percentage of young black girls being trafficked. The major cities IBWPPI included in our efforts to be advocates and educators on this issue of great concern were Los Angeles, Atlanta, Detroit, Miami, Chicago, Washington, DC and New York.

IBWPPI launched a human trafficking awareness tour across the country to raise awareness about this global humanitarian, crisis. The awareness tour convened individuals interested in

helping victims, survivors, and professionals working to eradicate trafficking daily. These discussions were the impetus to an initiative that specifically identifies the problem of trafficking of black girls and directs advocates, and practitioners, to agencies where solutions can be found.

The IBWPPI Awareness, Rescue, Counseling and Healing (ARCH) Initiative seeks to be the largest coalition of women's organizations to raise awareness about the disproportionate impact human trafficking has on women and girls domestically. By staging a nationwide awareness campaign that teaches the threats, risks, and dangers our girls fall prey to every day, we hope to heighten the sensitivity surrounding human trafficking. The ARCH project is developing and launching an interactive online directory with up to 200 vetted organizations with demonstrated success in the following areas: Awareness and Advocacy, Rescue, Counseling, and Healing for trafficked victims.

The ARCH Network was conceived in response to a call to action issued during a 2013 White House Summit on Human Trafficking. The network serves as a tool for social service agencies, government branches, civic organizations, churches, and individuals looking to assist victims of sex trafficking. It will facilitate a cross sharing of resources and information for organizations, entities and individuals operating in localities that are known to have higher instances of human trafficking activity.

IBWPPI's top priorities are to ensure the safety, protection, and empowerment of Black women and girls in the U.S. and abroad. We advocate for the following:

1. Services for Survivors. Survivors need broader access to culturally competent service providers that provide wrap-around services that support black women and girls who are more likely to be impoverished, unemployed, uneducated, lacking job skills, and are exiting the foster care system.
2. Decriminalization. States like California are a model in ending prostitution arrests for minors under 18 years old. Children should be referred to diversion programs instead of jail, juvenile hall, or criminal court.
3. Research. Investment in robust research that looks at the state of human trafficking from a global level will help us understand the scope of the problem. We urgently

need comprehensive data that will shine a spotlight on these affected populations by continent and by country.

## **Conclusion**

Modern-day slavery and the involvement of women and girls in forced commercial sex activity is an issue at epidemic proportions. As a global community, we need to humanize this issue and have empathy and compassion for human trafficking victims as these are not throwaway people. They are our mothers, sisters, children, neighbors, and members of our community. We should be concerned about their welfare, safety, and fundamental human rights. Black women and girls are especially vulnerable as they are overrepresented as victims and criminalized at a higher rate.

The global criminal infrastructure is so massive that it will take all of us to end the human trafficking crisis. Building awareness in all corners of our international community is the first step to eradicating human trafficking. We need worldwide, regional, and local efforts to be harmonized and better coordinated to ensure that every citizen is protected and receives proper care, support, and treatment if they have been affected by this human crisis.

Service providers need more funding for wrap-around services that support black women and girls in addressing their needs in obtaining permanent housing, drug treatment services, counseling, and most importantly, having access to educational and employment opportunities. These services lessen the chances of recidivism, improve their life outcomes, and give them a second chance in life.

We can all do something to help eradicate the sexual exploitation of our children, sisters, mothers, and friends. Join IBWPPI's fight to raise awareness and support policies that will protect not only our women and girls but all victims of human trafficking.

## Sources

1. "What is Human Trafficking," Department of Homeland Security, accessed September 11, 2019, <https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/what-human-trafficking>.
2. "Trafficking in Persons Report: June 2015," U.S. Department of State, accessed September 11, 2019, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2015>.
3. Stephanie Long, "More Than 40 Percent of Sex Trafficking Victims Are Black, According to Annual Black Women's Roundtable Report," Hello Beautiful, accessed September 10, 2019, <https://helloworldbeautiful.com/2933987/black-women-trafficking>.
4. "Trafficking in Persons Report: June 2019," U.S. Department of State, accessed September 11, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019-Trafficking-in-Persons-Report.pdf>.
5. "U.S. Laws on Trafficking in Persons," U.S. State Department, accessed September 10, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/international-and-domestic-law/#laws>.
6. "Frederick Douglas Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act," U.S. Representative Chris Smith accessed September 10, 2019, <https://chrissmith.house.gov/lawsandresolutions/frederick-douglass-trafficking-victims-prevention-and-protection-reauthorization-act-p-l-115-425.htm>.
7. "Black women and girls are missing, and no one seems to care," *the Grio*, accessed September 11, 2019, <https://thegrio.com/2017/03/21/black-women-and-girls-are-missing-and-no-one-seems-to-care>.
8. Mariya Moseley, "What We Know So Far About D.C.'s Missing Black and Latinx Teens," *Essence*, accessed September 11, 2019, <https://www.essence.com/news/missing-dc-girls-black-latinx-teens>.
9. Lily Herman, "Most Media Outlets Aren't Reporting on the Disappearance of Black and Latinx D.C. Teens," *Teen Vogue*, accessed September 11, 2019, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/most-media-outlets-arent-reporting-on-the-disappearance-of-black-and-latinx-dc-teens>.
10. Caren M. Holmes, "The Colonial Roots of the Racial Fetishization of Black Women," *Black & Gold*, 2, no. 2: (2016): 1-11, <https://openworks.wooster.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://search.yahoo.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1026&context=blackandgold>.
11. "The Slave Experience: Men, Women and Gender," THIRTEEN WNET, accessed September 11, 2019, <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/experience/gender/history2.html>.
12. Stevie J. Swanson, "Slavery Then and Now: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Modern-Day Human Trafficking: What Can We Learn from Our Past?" *Florida A&M*

*University Law Review*, 11, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 128-157,  
<http://commons.law.famu.edu/famulawreview/vol11/iss1/6>.

13. Sherlyn Twum-Akwaboah, "Black Girls and Sex Trafficking in Los Angeles!" *Los Angeles Sentinel* accessed September 11, 2019, <https://lasentinel.net/black-girls-and-sex-trafficking-in-los-angeles-2.html>.
14. "National Trends on Youth in Crisis in the United States," National Runway Safeline, accessed September 11, 2019, [https://www.1800runaway.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/NRS-2018-Trend-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.1800runaway.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/NRS-2018-Trend-Report_Final.pdf).
15. "Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act," Congress, accessed September 10, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/4980?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22trafficking%22%5D%7D&s=8&r=80>.
16. Erik Ortiz, "New California Law Does Not Legalize Child Prostitution," NBC News, September 10, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/new-california-law-does-not-legalize-child-prostitution-n701471>.
17. "Sex Trafficking," Polaris Project, accessed September 10, 2019, <https://polarisproject.org/human-trafficking/sex-trafficking>.
18. "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, accessed September 10, 2019, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Global\\_Report\\_on\\_TIP.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Global_Report_on_TIP.pdf).
19. "The Role of The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS) in Combating Trafficking in Persons," "The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, United Nations, accessed September 10, 2019, [https://icat.network/sites/default/files/publications/documents/ICAT\\_Issue\\_Brief\\_SDGs%202018.pdf](https://icat.network/sites/default/files/publications/documents/ICAT_Issue_Brief_SDGs%202018.pdf).
20. "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime," United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, accessed September 10, 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ProtocolTraffickingInPersons.asp>.
21. "The International Legal Frameworks concerning Trafficking in Persons," The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, United Nations, accessed September 10, 2019, [https://icat.network/sites/default/files/publications/documents/ICAT\\_Policy\\_Paper\\_1\\_The\\_International\\_Legal\\_Instruments.pdf](https://icat.network/sites/default/files/publications/documents/ICAT_Policy_Paper_1_The_International_Legal_Instruments.pdf).

