
Reporting Sex Trafficking: Overcoming Obstacles, Gaining Perspective

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Sex trafficking is a dark and complex issue that requires reporters to press beyond our reflexes, but it is also a somewhat un-tapped reservoir of stories that are prescient, necessary and – believe or not – begging to be told. In this ongoing tragedy, there are lessons in psychology, policy, law enforcement, biology, economics, philosophy, humanity and compassion. Yet we struggle to tell these stories well.

Obstacles abound. A reporter who attempts to lean on data alone will produce a one-dimensional story - an amalgam of flimsy reports by nonprofits determined to fundraise, police with misconceptions and politicians with agendas. Alone, this report would neglect the human toll of this crisis, the connecting tissue that will make your audience care enough to seek understanding. The same goes for a reporter who leans solely on advocates or law enforcement or policy changes or even the court testimony of a survivor. It is up to you to know all the players and variables that make your community susceptible. It is up to you to think outside your assumptions as well as those of your organization.

Prepare for criticism from peers, skepticism from bosses. Perhaps these are microcosms, glimpses into the societal, psychological and cultural reasons behind the slow call to action. Perhaps that’s the story.

Now that I’m off my soapbox, here are some practical tools that I hope will enable you to tell an impactful story about sex trafficking and to explain the” whys” and “hows.”

Research:

Do a Google news and Lexis Nexus search. You don’t need to conduct an academic study to learn much of the reporting out there does more harm than good. Much of it relies on bad data or statistics. Many stories are over-simplified (i.e. “She ran away from a broken home, ended up on the street, and BAM, she’s a prostitute”). Nothing is that simple. Some reporters out there miss the mark completely and fall back on antiquated definitions to tell a lurid story we have come to expect and which we will easily accept. It is their loss – they’ve missed clues to an emerging cultural shift, a philosophical dilemma of “criminal vs. victim?” – but it’s also the public’s loss. If this trend irks you,

vow to be a part of the solution. Determine how you'll do a better job, and start asking questions.

Determine the obstacles:

Take 30 minutes and think as a sociologist. What are your biases, your privileges, your ascribed characteristics that A) Help and B) Might hinder you? An example: (For me, I am a white male of relative privilege. I'm college educated. I'm a tall, large man. My subjects, some of whom suffer from a paralyzing fear of men, will need to learn to trust me.) Wear these on your sleeve, gather your research and set goals. Make some calls. Tell them why they should trust you.

The media apologist:

It won't be difficult to find people to talk to. Advocates are everywhere, you had a source inside the child welfare system, you talked to the lead vice detective or the crimes against children unit. All of these people are begging to get more stories in the news. It's an issue they see every day, but few believe it happens here. Yet, your reporter's brain is tingling. Why do you still feel so far from the story? Chances are your sources are holding back, not just about themselves – these are characters worth unraveling -- but the access they could grant you to the people who can get you REALLY close to the story. They are survivors. Throughout my year of reporting on this issue, I had innumerable conversations about the journalists before me who burned bridges and even damaged victims' recovery because they were sloppy, didn't do their research or were not sensitive to a the crucial human error that pervades this issue: classifications. (Can a child really choose to be a prostitute? Or are there prostituted children?) Apologize, if you must. Discuss how stories affect people. Why you care about this story. Be transparent about what you're writing.

Get close:

If you want to grab your readers or viewers, the natural goal is to find a survivor who can describe the horrors of the sex trade. Do so, but with caution. These folks have endured trauma few can understand. Advocates will point you to survivors, but often these people have been heavily prepped (ironically, contributing to the regurgitation of the same over-simplified story).

No perfect victim:

If you find a survivor with blonde hair, white skin, blue eyes, a 3.8 GPA, who grew up in an upper-middle class colonial, but was lured and coerced by a brutish street gang pimp, good for you. But I think there's less of that than your story might convey. Sure, anyone can become a victim. But the root causes of early sexual abuse, poverty, runaway, etc., are real. They come back to an obvious concept that somehow is easy to forget: We're talking about vulnerability. A teenage girl who started taking drugs because she ran from her abusive parents is indeed engaged in a crime, but this does not negate the fact that she is vulnerable. The vulnerable are the easiest to exploit.

Form relationships:

Figure out the law enforcement who get the issue. Find the messengers who have been knocking on doors to try to explain to people what's going on. Spend time with them. Time is a scarce commodity in the business, but those relationships will pay dividends. They'll keep you out of trouble, but they'll also keep you in the loop as this issue spins in the political sphere, in schools, at the state house, congress, so on. Treat it like a mini beat. Check in constantly.

Beware the numbers:

The amount of bogus numbers floating around, even on the local level, is staggering. Nonprofits are just making it up, it seems. Don't be fooled. And hey, doesn't the lack of reliable data show us how bad we've been at accepting or working against the problem?

Be patient:

Chances are survivors are dealing with trauma beyond your comprehension. Treat them with respect, dignity and patience. Save the indignant reporter stuff for the police and politicians.

Be multidisciplined:

There's nothing wrong with writing a feature instead of an investigative piece on this issue, or the other way around. The issue is dynamic and could benefit from many lenses. Decide what works for your material, your subjects and your community. Dogmatism will only hinder the story.