

THESIS

VICTIMHOOD AND ACTORHOOD: CONSTRUCTIONS OF AGENCY IN  
ANTI-TRAFFICKING ADVOCACY

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## ABSTRACT

### VICTIMHOOD AND ACTORHOOD: CONSTRUCTIONS OF AGENCY IN ANTI-TRAFFICKING ADVOCACY

This study seeks to advance understanding of how anti-trafficking organization websites construct victims' agency, and to engage in critical analyses of these constructions. Using content analysis of 264 websites for organizations which advocate for adult victims of human trafficking in the United States, I inductively identify themes in the ways victimhood and agency are portrayed. The use of 'survivor stories', definitions, images, and relational comparisons with other actors were several of the most common ways in which organizations represented victimhood, and I find that the majority of organizations construct victims' agency as insufficient and misused for self-advocacy. To interpret my findings, I turn to neo-institutional theory to understand how victims' agency is constructed, and patterned in the same way, across the majority of anti-trafficking organizations.

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## CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW

*Approximately 600,000-800,000 people are trafficked in the United States annually.*  
31:8 Project

*Every year, Breaking Free helps hundreds of women escape sex trafficking and prostitution through direct services.* Breaking Free

*Every 30 seconds, a new victim of human trafficking.* Beautiful Dream Society

In news and entertainment media, as well as in most advocacy work and some academic research, the topic of human trafficking is commonly framed in ways that conjure a potent image of a sexualized, helpless, and often female victim (Barnett 2016; Cunningham & Cromer 2016; Marchionni 2012). A chorus of advocacy organizations plead, “Be the voice for human trafficking victims and survivors” (“Advocates for Freedom”) and typically provide a gruesome collage of images depicting women and girls bound with rope and marked with barcode symbols (e.g., “End Slavery in Charlotte”; “Helpline Rhode Island”; “Humans Against Trafficking”; “Innocents at Risk”). This pattern, of victims as helpless, sexualized, kidnapped, and bound, reproduced again and again, reifies a construction in the public imagination, and, through repetition, validates this construction of victims and victimhood as both real and true. But who are the ‘victims’ of human trafficking and how are their actions, experiences, ideas, and circumstances defined and understood? What does the identifier ‘victim of human trafficking’ signify?

The literature on human trafficking raises questions and objections to the ways victims are commonly represented by anti-trafficking organizations (Cojocararu 2016; Hoyle, Bosworth, & Dempsey 2011; Johnston, Friedman, & Sobel 2014; Nichols, Gerassi, & Snider 2018), but sociological research on the process of construction remains limited. To date, no study has been

undertaken as a systematic study of these constructions across anti-trafficking organizations. This thesis will address this gap by examining how anti-trafficking organization websites construct victims' agency and by engaging in critical analyses of these constructions. I conduct a content analysis of 264 anti-trafficking organizations which serve adult victims in the U.S. and inductively identify themes in the construction of victim's agency. Recurrent patterns are identified and discussed in light of recent developments in neo-institutional theory, which serves as an efficient lens for understanding the production and reproduction of discursive practices among anti-trafficking organizations.

Assumptions about human trafficking victims described in the literature

Before I continue with a summary of the assumptions about victimhood critiqued in the literature, I want to first address that I use a somewhat problematic conceptualization of *victim* and *survivor*. These terms do not describe individuals in person-first language and, in their usage, imply limited agency. However, I use these terms because such usage is ubiquitous in advocacy, media, government, and academic discourses on human trafficking (Hebert 2016; Nichols et al. 2018).

Due to the hidden nature of human trafficking and difficulties in recording its effects, estimates on the number of victims, their gender, their age, their nationality, and occupational status must be viewed skeptically (Cockbain & Bowers 2019; Davy 2015; de Vries et al. 2019; Logan, Walker, & Hunt 2009; Munro-Kramer et al. 2020). Many authors maintain that reliable data "do not exist" for understanding the magnitude and demography of human trafficking. As Wilson and O'Brien (2016:32) observe what is reported "rely on the minority of observable cases detected by law enforcement; yet, these data likely suffer from severe selection biases".

Estimates on the number of victims range so widely that they are not useful, with statistics from prosecutions, convictions, incomplete investigations, and victim helplines each telling a different version of the nature and prevalence of trafficking (Jones & Kingshott 2016). Estimates and arguments on what kinds of trafficking are most common are similarly unreliable. Many policy makers and organizations maintain that forced prostitution is the most common form of trafficking while researchers argue that sex trafficking accounts for roughly ten percent of trafficking (Marchionni 2012; Hoyle et al. 2011; Jones & Kingshott 2016; O'Brien et al 2013). Moreover, the terms human trafficking and sex trafficking are often used interchangeably in advocacy discourse, which skews understandings of victimhood and risk factors (Andrijasevic & Mai 2016; Cojocar 2016; Hoyle et al. 2011; Nichols et al. 2018). This conflation of sex trafficking with human trafficking more broadly accounts for some of the variation and contradictions in estimates, and muddles attempts to distinguish representations of trafficking victimhood broadly from sex trafficking specifically.

In general, victims of human trafficking are assumed to be female, in part because of “U.S. public discourse and policy emphasis on the sexual exploitation of women and children” (de Vries et al. 2018:126). These assumptions serve “to invisibilize men and boys as trafficked persons” and “perpetuate stereotypes of females as always-victims and ignores how women, as well, may be beneficiaries of the exploitation of others” (Hebert 2016:282). Research suggests that males and females are equally likely to be victims of human trafficking as a broad category, and that both men and women are traffickers (Cunningham & Cromer 2016; Hoyle et al. 2011; Johnston et al. 2015), however, victims who receive assistance from organizations are predominantly female (Logan et al. 2009). Nevertheless, the gender of sex trafficking victims who receive services should not be used to infer the gender of the population of all human



trafficking victims because some organizations choose to serve only females ( e.g., “Amirah”; “Ascent 121”; “Beloved Atlanta”; “Breaking Free”; “Courage Lives”; “Free 2 Hope”) and because male victims face additional stigma in receiving assistance (Baker 2013; Gerassi 2015; Hebert 2016; Jones & Kingshott 2016; Miriam 2005).

Human trafficking is also a highly racialized and politicized topic. The literature is rich with content analysis of the sensational assumptions used to describe victimhood. In her analysis of rescue narratives in film and news media, for example, Carrie Baker aptly describes sensational-political human trafficking discourse “as an exchange of women between men” where heroic “white masculinities and justifications of excessive violence in political conflicts” are bolstered in pursuit of “rescuing women and children” (2013:15). These racial narratives are critiqued for being highly stylized versions of trafficking victimhood, for ignoring victims’ agency, and for generally misrepresenting the fact that most victim realities do not involve rescue by SWAT teams, kidnapping by ‘predatory foreign men’, or bright and simple futures available through rehabilitative programs (Andrijasevic & Mai 2016; Barnett 2016; Cojocaru 2015; Cornforth-Camden 2018; Gerassi 2015). Yet these misrepresentations and their sensational-political narratives continue to have a significant effect on policies and advocacy organizations (Andrijasevic & Mai 2016; Baker 2013; Barnett 2016; Cojocaru 2016).

Assumptions about trafficking are also skewed in the general public. Studies suggest that public audiences obtain understandings of victimization through art exhibits and films (Baker 2013; Cojocaru 2016) or by listening to ill-informed celebrity spokespersons and dogmatic religious campaigns (Barnett 2016; Hoyle et al. 2011) to learn about the realities of human trafficking. There are two salient problems authors point to with this kind of informational discourse. First, victimhood representations in popular movies such as *Taken*, *Whistleblower*,

*Candy Shop*, and *Trade* reveal more about the fascinations, fetishes, and moral panics of society than they do about human trafficking realities (Andrijasevic & Mai 2016; Hebert 2016; O'Brien et al. 2013). Second, when anti-trafficking organizations use sensationalized rhetoric to motivate donors and communicate with uninformed audiences (Hoyle et al. 2011), individuals are led to believe that there are no other realities and that ideal victim tropes accurately represent all victims who deserve assistance (Johnston et al. 2015). These popular outlets deliver strategic snapshots and liberal adaptations of human trafficking narratives (Baker 2013) that, like other rhetoric of sexualized racism, boast evidence of, explanation for, and model a response to a social phenomenon all with a single image (Cloud 2004).

In summary, the literature explains that human trafficking victims are widely, but unverified, assumed to be female, that sex trafficking is overrepresented compared to other forms of trafficking, and that ideal victim types of the racially exotic and sexualized female emerge out of entertainment media but strongly influence policy and advocacy discourse.

Recent research has begun to address the issues caused by sensationalized misrepresentations and ideal victim types. These studies primarily include qualitative analyses conducted outside of the U.S. (see Hamal Gurung 2014; Le 2016; Paasche 2018; Struble 2019; Viuhko 2019), and, to a lesser extent, interviews conducted with social service providers in the U.S. similarly offer alternative constructions of victimhood (see Cojocaru 2015; Hoyle et al. 2011; Nichols et al. 2018; Sabon 2018). Their descriptions of human trafficking victims as making “forced choices” from limited options for income (Hoyle et al. 2011:318) and as experiencing trafficking in a way that others do not fit with predominant “themes regarding the impact of the legal definition of ‘severe forms of trafficking’” (Sabon 2016:460) contrast sharply with the ideal victim type constructed in news and entertainment media. Hoyle et al observes that

“The problems inherent in constructing a ‘typical’ narrative are more far-reaching than simply matters of accuracy. Rather, a victim’s failure to experience or frame her experience in terms of a typical trafficking narrative may deny her the status of an ‘ideal victim’” and the credibility and support that attaches to it (Hoyle et al. 2011:322). A service worker interviewed by Nichols put it this way:

All these terminology things, it’s just holding us back and it’s just cauterizing people from accessing services that they really need because they don’t fit our cute little definition. I think sex trafficking should mean that an individual who has had to engage in some kind of sexual experience whether that’s dancing, sex or some sort of—and they did feel force in some way whether that was from the hand of a human being or just an environmental factor like, “I’m really poor. I haven’t eaten. I need to make some money and so I’m doing this.” (Nichols et al. 2018:77).

#### Assumptions about victims in U.S. policy response

The literature also describes how assumptions about human trafficking victims are evident in policies and services created to address trafficking victimhood. Primarily, these follow from assumptions about female victims of sex trafficking being representative of all human trafficking victims. Studies have critiqued the criminal justice system as having patriarchal bias which causes “a preoccupation with sex trafficking” and an aversion to addressing cultural factors “of male sex-seeking behavior considered a demonstration of masculinity and a normative male experience, [ in which] a demand is created for unrestricted and affordable sexual access to women, which human trafficking for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation provides” (Jones & Kingshott 2016:3). Policies take a crime and punishment approach to trafficking where the focus is on arresting sex traffickers, with far less attention paid to labor trafficking, victims’ needs, and male victims generally (Baker 2013; Cockbain & Bowers 2019; Davy 2015; Gerassi 2015).

Even for female victims of trafficking, “the lack of ‘fit’ between legal constructions and lived experience leads many scholars to contest the definitional rigidity surrounding consent, coercion, and choice (often key to sexual crimes) by examining how constraint shapes action” (Sabon 2016:462). Notions about consent, choice, and force are further complicated by patriarchal cultures, problematizing victims ‘fit’ with ideal definitions and contributing to a denial of male victims’ experiences. O’Brien and colleagues explain that TVPA constructions of victimhood led to “the anti-prostitution pledge embedded within US anti-trafficking legislation” and argue that the blurring of prostitution with trafficking create policies which make “commercial sex the exemplar of a society in which traditional values associated with sex are debased” (2013:404). The literature indicates that the construction of the ideal sex trafficking victim reflects policy makers interests far more than it is a reflection of victims’ lived experiences (Baker 2013; Davy 2015; Gerassi 2015; Hyland 2001; Jones & Kingshott 2016; Miriam 2005). Advocacy organizations, in turn, shape their discourse around the political ‘preoccupations with sex trafficking’. This further complicates the reliability of data on human trafficking data and creates what Wilson & O’Brien (2016:32) call “severe selection biases”. Nichols and colleagues also find this in their research based on interviews with service providers. For example, one provider explained how policies and government funding influence the rhetoric organizations use to best meet their own goals:

There’s one organization in [urban Midwestern city] that says that they work on prostitution specifically. I said to their executive director, “You guys, I keep hearing your material, you’re on the radio and this and that, and you’re saying human trafficking. Are you guys a trafficking organization?” She said, “No, we’re a prostitution organization, but the money is for sex trafficking.” (Nichols et al. 2018:80)

As the literature demonstrates, an abbreviated understanding of human trafficking victimhood based on disproportionate representations of sex trafficking and assumptions about victims

creates challenges and perpetuates difficulties for service organizations and researchers. In addition to assumptions and confusion around definitions, populations served, and gathering reliable data, the literature also describes a lack of assessment for the effectiveness of support services meeting victims' needs (Davy 2015; Munro-Kramer et al. 2019; Long & Dowdell 2018). Comparative research with domestic violence service providers suggests that metrics for interpreting the effectiveness of services need to be based on "service users" and "survivor insights", not on broad industry standards. This is because the "inclusion of survivor perspectives helps ensure that anti-trafficking efforts are culturally appropriate, and serves as a reality check to guide outreach, advocacy, service provision, research, and policy-making efforts" (Lockyer 2020:4). The provision of services, however, is primarily conducted through anti-trafficking organizations which almost exclusively rely on assumption of the ideal female sex trafficking victim, making it difficult for survivors or advocates to bring in an alternative construction of victimhood based on lived experiences which have a 'lack of fit' with legal definitions.

In summary, the literature describes many problems with assumptions about victimhood and how those assumptions shape policy, research, and advocacy. The assumptions and outcomes are fairly circular: patriarchal culture influences criminal process frames. These frames shape policies that influence funding. Funding incentivizes service organizations to use popular rhetoric to communicate with public audiences. This rhetoric appeals to public audiences who learn about trafficking through the media that supports patriarchal narratives and on and on the reproduction of the ideal victim continues. For anyone looking to propose an alternative understanding of victimhood, it can be hard to know where to jump in and interrupt this self-propelling cycle.

I select the construction of victims' agency on anti-trafficking organization websites as a topic of analysis because I am interested in their multiple ties to the public, policies, victims, and researchers, and moreover wonder if those ties indicate organizations have more options for disrupting the life cycle of assumptions about victims of human trafficking. This thesis inductively explores the construction of victims' agency on anti-trafficking websites in the U.S. and questions how sociological theory can aid in explaining those constructions.

The core argument I make in the thesis is that the majority of anti-trafficking organizations construct victims' agency as insufficient and misused for self-advocacy. I show how organizations advance specific understandings of victims, victimization, and capacity for action through the use of 'survivor stories', descriptions of exploitation, definitions, images, rescue narratives, and relational comparisons with other actors. I analyze these themes, and the claims I draw from them, with sociological neo-institutional theory to provide a deeper understanding of the victim construct among anti-trafficking organizations.

Chapter One provides a summary of the literature to orient the gaze of the thesis and Chapter Two describes my methodological approach. Chapter Three is the first of two results chapters, and it explains how organizations construct victims' agency as insufficient. Chapter Four explains how organizations construct victims' agency as misused. In Chapter Five, I consider the findings of my content analysis in light of institutional theory and conclude with a reflection on the limitations and implications of this study.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

A variety of personal experiences and my familiarity with an eclectic body of literature on the topic of human trafficking brought me to this research project, and my growing interests in understanding social action and shared meanings led me to formulate my research question: How do anti-trafficking organizations construct victimhood and victims' agency? My objective in the research is to identify salient themes in constructions of victimhood across organizations serving adult victims in the U.S. This chapter outlines the methods I adopted to meet this aim and it is divided into two subsections. The first subsection addresses my familiarity with trafficking to explain how my interests in human trafficking victimology began and shaped my study design. The second section explains my process of data gathering and coding.

### Positionality and Study Design

I briefly describe how I approach this topic and position myself as a researcher because the way in which a researcher frames analysis of others' experiences serves as consequential pretext and definition for understanding those experiences and analysis (Cloud 2004). Moreover, because qualitative research is not as much "about observing, but about understanding", the researchers must describe and "make use of an internal dialogue that repeatedly examines *what the researcher knows* and *how the researcher came to know this*" (Lune & Berg 2017:121). The following paragraphs describe the significant ways in which my academic career has shaped what I know about human trafficking and will also explain how my thesis aims to address some of the limitations I found in criminal justice approaches to anti-trafficking advocacy.

As an undergraduate sociology student, I took a course on crime in the workplace and a professor of political science gave a guest lecture on her recent ethnographic work in southeastern Europe with people who had experienced human trafficking. In my criminal justice textbooks and coursework, human trafficking had been explained as kind of violent organized crime closely linked with prostitution and black-market goods, but the guest lecturer's study described how victims of human trafficking were relatable ordinary people with complicated lives often not at all involved with prostitution or illegal goods (See Struble 2018). Her talk raised questions for me about the real lives of victims and the ways in which their identities were constructed, particularly in light of the complexity and diversity of experiences among victims of human trafficking which were insufficiently addressed in criminal justice perspectives. I had found little research in my criminology courses which moved beyond basic analysis of human trafficking as a highly lucrative and secretive organized crime tied to prostitution and black-market goods (see Fisher, Reynolds, & Sloan 2016).

I was unable to find satisfactory explanations for constructions of victims' agency within criminal justice and even human trafficking literature, but my coursework on contemporary sociological theory introduced me to interactional and institutional theories which illuminated the emergence of meanings and interpretations of interactions I was curious about. I began using symbolic interactionist theories to interpret qualitative studies on human trafficking victimhood and soon realized there were recognizable patterns of action in victim and trafficker interactions (e.g., Cornforth-Camden 2018; Le 2016; Siegel & de Blank 2010; Viuhko 2019). This realization allowed me to see that victimization is an institution in Berger and Luckman's definition of institutions as socially constructed templates for action which have a history of negotiations among actors and are maintained through ongoing interactions among actors who consciously or



subconsciously enact scripts (Barley & Tolbert 1997). However, interactionist and institutional theories do not directly address constructions of victimhood or exploitative relationships; the inductive analysis of human trafficking victimhood through a lens of contemporary sociological theory is my unique tack for understanding construction' of victims' agency.

Furthermore, my experiences as an intern with a state-funded victim advocacy office and as an attendee at multiple conferences for advocates and survivors of sexual and domestic violence added to my understanding of victimization as a socially constructed template for interpreting interaction. The lived experiences of victimization that I became familiar with through these experiences were complex; I did not find that traditional criminological theories adequately captured victims' interpretations of action. Alternatively, contemporary sociological theories provided deeper insights into the interactions, relationships, and environments which were central to understanding human trafficking as a social phenomenon, but still did not address the specificities of anti-trafficking organizations or of advocacy as an institution.

I also read the official policies on and definitions for human trafficking provided in the US Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (US TVPRA), the Trafficking Victims Protection Act 2000 (TVPA), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (PPSPTPWC). These documents helped me to understand legal and political frames for human trafficking in the U.S. and enabled me to critically engage with a growing trend in the literature that problematized the constructions of victimhood produced in them (e.g., Baker 2013; Davy 2015; de Vries et al. 2019; Jones & Kingshott 2016; O'Brien et al. 2013; Sabon 2018). Many authors critiqued the assumptions about victimhood portrayed in these official definitions of

trafficking, but the few anti-trafficking organizations I was familiar with at the time cited these definitions as explanations of human trafficking. This evidence of disagreement among advocacy organizations, policies, and research led me to focus my interest on anti-trafficking organizations and the ways in which they construct victimhood.

I selected U.S. based anti-trafficking organization websites as a unit of study because I was interested to know how human trafficking was framed as a domestic concern, not as an international or ‘only happens there never here’ kind of issue. In light of the need described above for greater theorization about human trafficking victimhood and victims’ agency, I adopted an inductive approach to address the core meanings and constructions of victimhood evident on the websites, looking for major themes and patterns in a grounded theory approach to the content (Glasser & Strauss 1967).

The constructions of victimhood created on organization websites are used in advocacy discourse, research, and policies (e.g., Andrijasevic & Mai 2016; Baker 2013; Barnett 2016), but I had not found an adequate explanation of the constructions themselves which appeared to be unilaterally reproduced across organizations. I initially considered conducting interviews with organization representatives to learn more about their choices and logic behind the representation of victimhood on the websites but decided against such an approach because during the months I planned to collect my data, all organizations were facing unprecedented difficulties with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and would be less likely to have time for participating in my study. However, because each organization had made choices in designing the content of their websites and how they would depict victimhood, the images and text used could serve as suitable artifacts for content analysis. My goal in coding the data was to discover how organizations construct victimhood through the definitions, descriptions, narratives, and other representations

included on the websites, all of which I would take at face value presented as ‘facts’ by the organizations in advocacy discourse. Moreover, content analysis and an inductive approach to the data were appropriate methodological choices because I wanted to gather and code the data without predetermined categories for analysis.

### Data Gathering and Coding

The data set for this study was created with 264 websites for anti-trafficking organizations which offer services for adult victims in the United States. I define an anti-trafficking organization as an organized group or collective which provides services, access to resources, or advocacy on behalf of victims of human trafficking. Criteria for inclusion in the study following this initial round were: (1) that the organization had a functioning website, (2) the organization presented itself as an anti-trafficking organization only or at most in tandem with one other significant interest, (3) the organization serves adults victims of trafficking, and (4) the organization addresses human trafficking in the U.S. only or primarily.

The data were gathered over the Summer of 2020 using the search terms “anti-trafficking organizations”, “human trafficking organizations”, and “anti-human trafficking organizations” for U.S. based organizations entered into a Google search, the Charity Navigator database, and the IRS 501c (3) database. Charity Navigator is an organization which centralizes and rates nonprofit charities in the U.S. which have filed a Form 990 with the IRS for at least seven years, have generated at least one million dollars in revenue for two consecutive years of which forty percent is generated from public support, and which allocate at least one percent of expenses for administrative costs and one percent for fundraising expenses for three consecutive years (“Charity Navigator’s Methodology”). This database enabled me to identify high functioning and

trusted anti-trafficking organizations. I used the IRS “Tax Exempt Organization Search” database for 501c (3) organizations to capture any organizations which did not yet qualify for inclusion in the Charity Navigator database. Because both Charity Navigator and the IRS databases have restrictive standards for inclusion and both have a delay of several years in updating their databases based on tax filing reports, I also used Google searches to capture any organizations not yet registered on the other two databases, and to ensure I meticulously reviewed searches for local organizations in each state. Searches for organizations continued until each query on each platform returned only organizations already included or that had been rejected.

I identified 264 anti-trafficking organizations in the U.S. that provide resources and services for adults, and I chose to code for themes across all 264 organizations instead of selecting a smaller sample from this set. Although coding each of these organizations took a great amount of time and effort, working with the total population of all 264 enabled the identification of representative themes and to not overlook important differences in what is arguably an emergent field of victim advocacy. Moreover, I was not sure what my inductive analysis would reveal, and I wanted to have as much data as I could reasonably handle in order to observe patterns that could be, for example, tied to cultural regions, year the organization was established, religious affiliation, or political stance.

Each organization was entered as a ‘case’ on NVIVO-12 and populated with text and images copied from the website. All content was copied from each page on the organization’s website which described the mission, goals, services, history, educational materials, advocacy discourse, and fundraising efforts offered by the organization during the summer of 2020. Information not copied from the websites included biographies of board members,

announcements for upcoming meetings, or information only pertinent to other interests of the organization such as domestic violence or child sexual exploitation. I considered including all of the information from the websites because it is possible that information about board members and how the organization frames other interests are tangentially relevant to their constructions of victimhood but decided against it because the additional analysis required to contextually understand each organization holistically would distract from my goal of broadly understanding major themes in constructions of victimhood across organizations.

I revisited my research question frequently and determined what to gather based on whether or not the content described or implied representations of victimhood. I approached the data inductively, without themes or codes beyond basic descriptive information in mind but took note of patterns and themes as I coded and recoded the data. My knowledge about human trafficking, victimology, and contemporary sociological theory were certainly a backdrop against which I observed the data as I coded, but I practiced a grounded theoretical approach to allow “the code categories [to] reflect the categories which reflect the categories of meaning used” on the websites (Lune & Berg 2017). For example, my codes for “services”, “hope”, “action steps”, “rescue narratives” and “at risk” contained what the organization presented as a ‘facts’, which I handled as connecting “each incident applicable to each category” (Glasser & Strauss 1967:105) as I coded all 264 organizations. Coding in this way allowed me to preserve the advocacy rhetoric of each organization while also efficiently organizing my database.

I thematically coded the data in four rounds over five months, inductively allowing the codes to shift, expand, and collapse as themes emerged. In the first round I coded broad salient themes in the content, in the second round I reviewed the content again and coded for subthemes, and in the third and fourth rounds I refined the subthemes, beginning to critically observe the

relationships between codes. I took several days off from the project between each round of coding in an effort to approach the data with a fresh perspective each time and to re-focus on dominant patterns. With each round I noticed relationships between codes that could be expanded on or simplified, which helped me to focus on major themes while contextualizing minor differences. I used the annotations and memo writing features on NVIVO-12 for keeping track of the relationships I saw emerging between codes and to select which excerpts best exemplified the patterns I observed. To group my codes and eventually select the excerpts to include in the manuscript I drew on Robert Weiss' explanation that excerpts in qualitative reports should "forcefully present what is widely shared" but I also kept track of instances where there was a distinct minority of organizations challenging a dominate theme and I included these to better "forward an argument" about the contrast between themes (1994:191). I stopped coding after the fourth round because the patterns in primary themes had not shifted since the third round and the data was sufficiently organized to answer my research question.

I created 52 codes which eventually grouped loosely into two analytic categories: (1) based on whether they described victims in terms of victim characteristics or (2) if they described victimhood relationally by comparison with other actors (an outline of my codes is included in the Appendix). Forming my analytic categories in this way reflected the perspectives of the content coded, meaning that some content defined victimhood as an identity in terms of personhood characteristics, and others defined victimhood through comparison with individuals who were not victimized.

The following two results chapters are the product of my analyses. The first results chapter demonstrates how organizations attributed appearances, thoughts, and experiences to victims in ways that defined the objectified victim's agency as insufficient for self-exit and

advocacy. The second results chapter demonstrates the relational construction of victimhood in which victims' agency is described as faulty, or misused, for self-exit and advocacy.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS I

In seeking to identify the ways in which anti-trafficking organizations construct victimhood, I used inductive thematic coding to analyze the content of 264 anti-trafficking websites. My coding ultimately revealed two main analytic themes in how anti-trafficking websites construct victimhood and victims' agency, and these main themes informed the two key claims I make in the thesis: 1) victims' agency is constructed as *insufficient* for self-exit and advocacy, 2) victims' agency is constructed as *misused* and in need of correction. Each of these claims will be described in the results chapters and discussed together in the discussion chapter in light of implications for anti-trafficking advocacy efforts.

### Claim 1: Agency as Insufficient

My first claim is that anti-trafficking organizations primarily construct victims' agency as insufficient for self-exit, where self-exit is defined as a victim's ability to create and carry out a strategy or plan to remove themselves from a situation of human trafficking victimization. And by *insufficient*, I mean that victims' agency is constructed as lacking, restricted, or deficient.

This claim is based on an analysis of how anti-trafficking organizations describe victimhood and victims' agency through representations of victims' characteristics, including the 'voice', experiences of exploitation, and appearances used to define what 'a victim' is. Below I develop and clarify this argument in three parts and explain how I observed the construction of victims' agency as insufficient. The first subsection focuses on descriptions of victims through the use of 'survivor stories', the second subsection addresses descriptions of exploitation, and the third focuses on representations of victims' appearances and needs. I include appearances in this way because the organizations choose images and descriptions to evoke particular ideas about



victims who are physically confined, mistreated, and unable to exercise agency for self-exit. I contend these three subthemes reveal an essentialized construct of ‘the victim’, one who is unable to coordinate their thoughts and actions sufficiently to influence their own future.

### *Rhetorical use of victims’ stories and thoughts in anti-trafficking advocacy*

Survivor stories represented a common way by which organizations gave victims ‘voice’. The majority of organizations in this study include survivor stories to explain the nature of trafficking and the role of the organization. Whether these stories accurately reflect survivors’ experiences or are told in the way the survivor wants them told is an important question, but one to which the answer remains beyond the scope of the current study. Instead, I focus on the way organizations use stories to portray victims and give ‘voice’ to construct an understanding of victimhood as insufficient.

In anti-trafficking discourse there exists what are commonly referred to as the three ‘Rs’ in which victims are ‘reached’, ‘rescued’ from situations of exploitation, and then they become survivors after services provided by the organization have ‘restored their lives’. Over 90 percent of organizations in this study use this framework for explaining their goals and contextualizing survivor stories. Organizations sometimes used infographics to depict the conceptual progression of reaching, rescuing, and restoring, and frequently incorporated the ‘3Rs’ directly into mission and solution statements.

Our operational strategy, and the heart cry of our organization, is to *Reach, Rescue, and Restore*. (“A21”, emphasis mine).

Through education, we *reach* and empower people to join us to end exploitation and make restoration possible. Through networking, we work with organizations that are on the front lines recovering survivors. Through the safe home, we provide programming that *restores* the whole person - heart, mind, body, and soul. (“Wings of Refuge”, emphasis mine)

These examples are representative of the fact that the framework of the ‘3Rs’ was central to the majority of anti-trafficking organizations and was a foundational influence on how victimhood was represented in survivor stories. Organizations positioned themselves ‘on the front lines’ of rescuing and restoring victims and included survivor stories to validate their mission statements and goals. For example, the following excerpts from survivor stories reinforced organizations use of ‘3R’ frameworks.

As the raid ensued, authorities rescued 3 minor girls and 2 women, escorting them out of the building and to safety. During interviews with police, the survivors explained how they were sold to customers to profit the suspects. The victims were then brought to AIM’s Restoration Home to receive healing. (“Agape International Missions”)

They rescued me a couple of years ago when I was being stalked bad. They sent in a team to pack up my things and put in storage, I was crying so hard after going through months of hell. (“Free International”)

Survivor stories were used as vignettes to describe victims’ needs for the organization’s services, emphasizing victims as rescuable and restorable. And these excerpts of ‘survivor stories’ are broadly reflective of how organizations use representations of victims’ ‘voice’ and thoughts in endorsing the organization’s advocacy campaigns. This pattern was observed across organizations and revealed a consistently shared description of victims as passive and waiting for intervention and the organization rescuing and restoring them. The stories attributed to ‘Cathy’ and ‘Kelle’ exemplified this pattern:

For a girl who had known little luck, Cathy finally got her share in the form of Steve Webster, the South Portland police detective who arrived at the hotel where she was being held captive with a warrant for her arrest. Cathy still remembers the moment and the officer’s kindness. “Steve said, ‘I’d like to help you.’” (“Courage Lives”)

It’s horrifying to think, but Kelle was trafficked by her mother when she was only 6 years old. ‘The abuse from my childhood affected me for a long time. I made terrible choices and ended up with a guy who began to traffick me, just like my mother. The Dream Center helped me to see a new future for myself and my baby. I’m so thankful for all that

they've done to help me be a good mom and have a good life'. ("Phoenix Dream Center").

Victims were portrayed as waiting to be 'reached' and requiring 'rescue' because they could not act or speak on their own behalf. Victims' agency was framed as insufficient for escaping a hotel room where they "remember what hopeless and helpless felt like" ("Rejuvenating Women"), and for making 'good' choices or envisioning a new future as in "the most important thing I've learned is that I am an adult and I get to make my own choices in life going forward" ("Wings of Refuge"). Organizations used survivor stories to construct victims' agency as insufficient for self-exit and -advocacy, but who must instead be "transformed from victims into survivors as they begin to RESTORE their lives" ("Lighthouse for life") in accordance with the organization's services and agenda. In these ways victims' agency was diminished, and their best course of action was described as waiting for rescue.

Organizations used survivor stories to give victims 'voice', as in "For those who have no voice, we rally on their behalf" ("Win This Fight"), and "restoring the voice, value and identity of people impacted by human trafficking" ("Northern California Anti Trafficking Coalition"). The stories were presented as evidence to legitimize the 'reach, rescue, and restore' goals of organizations which unilaterally construct victims as 'waiting for rescue' because their agency is insufficient for self-exit.

Mission statements were another way in which organizations gave 'voice' to victims by describing victims' thoughts. These statements presented organizations as providing victims with 'hope, freedom, and a path to a better life'. Hope and freedom were the most frequently discussed, with thirty percent of organizations mentioning them in a mission statement directly, and victims' ideas about dignity were often intertwined with ideas about hope and freedom. As

the following excerpts describe, the absence of hope and freedom were framed by the organization as obstacles to victims exiting trafficking.

Freedom. Hope. A new beginning. For victims of human trafficking, these words might seem like unrealistic concepts. But there is help, and there is hope because the people in Wichita are aware of the problem of sex trafficking and they want to help. (“ICTSOS End Human Trafficking in Wichita”)

Our hope is that through a supportive, secure environment, our guests can navigate their way through the dark water and “vines” that entangle their lives and lead to the light where their past can be healed, hope can be restored, and they can be inspired to live fruitful lives. (“Lily Pad Haven”)

As in the excerpt of “Lily Pad Haven” victims often were described as lacking hope and bound in a metaphorical “darkness” from which organizations will free them. Organizations described the process of rescuing and restoring victims as “a difficult healing process, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel” for victims because services were available to help them “dream again” (“Central Missouri Stop Human Trafficking Coalition”). The absence of ‘hope’ and ‘freedom’ are used to engender an understanding of victimhood in relation to physical isolation or confinement where hope is absent and must ‘be restored’ by people who are ‘aware of the problem’ and can intervene to offer freedom.

It is notable that hope and freedom were described as ‘unrealistic concepts’ for victims to have on their own because they “live in a constant state of fear and dependence” on traffickers (“Tapestri”). In this sense, ‘hope’ is treated as a thing one can transfer and give to others as in “providing hope and restoration to individuals who have been trafficked” (“Rejuvenating Women”) and the provision of hope is treated as an avenue for ‘rescuing’ victims such that they “can be inspired to live fruitful lives” (“Lily Pad Haven”). Clearly, trafficking limits freedom and potentially diminishes hope in some ways, what I am pointing out is a common pattern implied by trafficking organizations: until a victim is freed, they remain without hope and uninspired to

live fruitful lives. Hope was thereby conceptualized as a requirement for exit, and victims' absence of hope was linked to their insufficient agency for self-exit.

Many organizations implied that a 'lack of self-worth' and/or 'dignity' were why hope and freedom were 'unrealistic concepts' until self-worth was restored through intervention. The mission of the organization was framed as restoring either hope and worth in order to free and restore the victim.

While in the life, dignity and worth are stripped down to nothing so our aftercare programs are centered around holistic restoration to create self-worth, confidence, and empowered people. ("Exploit No More")

Providing hope and worth to a victim were framed as "the key to releasing the captives, helping them see they have value and worth" ("Be the Key"); the victims' lack of hope or worth was made intelligible by the hope and worth an organization offers through restoration. In other words, organizations legitimized their representations of victims' lack of hope and insufficient agency for self-exit through emphasizing the ways in which their services 'released captives' through "safely restoring a sense of hope" and self-worth ("Magdalene Omaha"). These constructions paint a picture in which victims are fatalistic, passive, and waiting to be saved.

Victims either do not, or cannot, hope for change and rely on others to show them an alternative future. The hope and worth provided by an organization were operationalized as requirements for having sufficient agency and a desire for freedom:

You are Worthy: A victim must want to escape for recovery to begin. This concept is more complicated than it may seem. Victims have been blackmailed, their families threatened; they have been given drugs and are held back by their addiction. At Just Love, we want to help survivors break through this pattern of thinking. ("Just Love Worldwide").

In this way hope and self-worth are emphasized as causes of insufficient agency for 'wanting to escape'. A common pattern observed was the assertion that the origins of hopefulness and

worthiness reside with the organization and can be transferred to victims through rhetoric, as in ‘you are worthy’ and ‘there is help, and there is hope’. Such statements further demonstrate the construction of insufficient agency as they locate ‘hope’ and ‘worth’ as keys to freedom that remain beyond the reach of victims themselves and, moreover, accessible only through others. Victims were constructed as vulnerable to “the business of stealing freedom for profit” (“National Human Trafficking Hotline”) because ‘hope’ and ‘freedom’ were operationalized as portable concepts removed from victims and accessible only by organizations with ‘programs centered around holistic restoration to create self-worth’.

Following from declarations to “Raise your voice—speak up for those who have no voice” (“Michigan Human Trafficking Task Force”), many organizations spoke for victims through their mission statements to “restore hope and redefine worth for human trafficking” victims (“Priceless Alaska”). Ideas about hope, freedom, and worth were the most common thoughts to be attributed to victims by organizations, and victims were described as lacking the hope, freedom, and self-worth required for self-exit. In other words, the thoughts attributed to victims were operationalized as evidence of insufficient agency for self-exit.

This subtheme examined how survivor stories were used to give victims ‘voice’ and mission statements were used to attribute thoughts in the construction of victimhood. Both rhetorical implements supported organizations’ role as a source of hope and freedom for victims who were represented as waiting to be ‘reached, rescued, and restored’. Lack of hope and self-worth were portrayed as causes of insufficient agency and therefore waiting for rescue was described as victims’ only viable option for exit. The next subtheme analyzes how organizations represent victims’ experiences of exploitation in constructions of victimhood, which shed

additional light on how organizations portray victims' agency as insufficient for self-exit through descriptions of victims' characteristics.

*Rhetorical use of exploitation descriptions in anti-trafficking advocacy*

Descriptions of exploitation and definitions of trafficking were salient ways in which organizations objectified and essentialized victimhood. This subsection explains organizations' descriptions of how victims are sexually exploited, and the definitions they used for identifying human trafficking, both of which construct victims' agency as insufficient for self-advocacy.

Nearly sixty percent of organizations represented victims' experiences of exploitation quantitatively as rates of exploitation per day. The following excerpts are representative of this theme.

Drugs can only be sold once. Human beings can be sold over and over again. In the case of a sex slave, that might be 15, 20 or more times a day. ("North Alabama Human Trafficking Task Force")

Girls' precious bodies are being sold 7 days a week, 365 days a year in our own Oregon communities for the greed and profit of their trafficker or pimp. ("Redemption Ridge")

These descriptions of exploitation underscore the frequency of exploitation as an important component of victimhood. Time was used as unit of measurement and the number of times a victim was 'sold' over a period of hours framed victimhood as an objectified status of being. In explaining that "victims can be sold 15-40 times every 24 hours" ("Selah Freedom") organizations describe exploitation as applied *to* a victim as a unit of sale. Victims were constructed as passive objects of exploitation, evoking an understanding of victimhood as a novel experience distinct from normal human experiences of weeks and days not comprehensible by a rate of sale.

The organizations contextualized the frequency of exploitation with statements about the age and longevity of victims, stating that “The average lifespan of victims is 7 years, and the average age of recruitment in the United States is between 11 and 14 years old” (“Trafficking Justice”). This description is broadly reflective of the ways in which victims were objectified with market-value characteristics. Victims were defined as ‘bodies being sold 7 days a week’ between fifteen and forty times per day over an ‘average lifespan’ of seven years. These constructions of victimhood which used descriptors that situated a person as ‘sold over and over again’ objectified the victim as an object for use by other agentic actors. When victims were represented as objects of exploitation their agency was diminished to that of an object, insufficient for self-advocacy.

In other words, representations of trafficking victims’ experiences as frequencies of exploitation constructed victims as objects which are sold by traffickers and rescued by organizations. The alarming specifics of victims being sold ‘more than 20 times in a day’ implies that the victim is experiencing excessive exploitation and would certainly want to escape, but cannot self-exit or advocate due to insufficient, object-like agency.

Additionally, the definitions of human trafficking used by organizations represented victims’ experiences as unvaried. Each website in this study clearly indicated a definition of human trafficking, whether an official definition borrowed from the United Nations protocol, the TVPA 2000 definition, or a metaphorical description. The pattern that emerged across the use of all kinds of definitions regardless of the original source was a deductive application of definitions to construct victimhood. I use the term ‘deductively’ to point to an observed contrast with inductive descriptions of how victims’ experiences may instead only partially reflect broad definitions. The majority of organizations in this study used deductive definitions which offer



essentialized constructions of victimhood and highlight the oppressive and exploitative nature of trafficking against which victims' agency is insufficient for action. The following excerpts exemplify themes of deductive reasoning in defining the experience of human trafficking victimization.

Human trafficking is slavery. It's the illegal trade of human beings. It's the recruitment, control, and use of people for their bodies and for their labor. Through force, fraud, and coercion, people everywhere are being bought and sold against their will—right now in the 21st century. But phrases like 'slavery' and 'human trafficking' can still feel ambiguous. This is the reality: slavery is violence. It's physical, verbal, and sexual abuse. It's forced prostitution. It's barbaric working conditions. (“A21”)

Human traffickers will use whatever method will work to trap their victims into doing what they want them to do. They will use force, fraud and coercion to gain and maintain control over their victims. Force involves rape, beatings and confinement to control victims. (“North Alabama Human Trafficking Task Force”)

Victimhood was framed as an experience involving physical, verbal, and sexual abuse in slavery-like conditions intended to confine and control victims. A monolithic narrative in which all victims experience the same kind of 'force, fraud, and coercion' is implied, and victims' agency is constructed as insufficient for resisting those methods of control. Furthermore, human trafficking victimhood was described as consisting of these same experiences throughout the U.S. and worldwide. The following excerpts are generalizable examples of this kind of deductive definition and essentialized representation.

Hu•man Traf•fick•ing / (h)yoom n trafiking / -noun. 1. The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for sex trafficking or labor trafficking. It is the second largest and fastest growing criminal industry worldwide. (“Advocates for Freedom”)

The Three Main Components of Human Trafficking Are: Force - confinement, deprivation, sexual, or physical assault, choking, hitting, burning, and gang rape; Fraud - falsely promising education, travel, and contracts, through psychological manipulation or a fake identity; Coercion - threatening to cause harm to an individual or their loved ones, using fear (real or perceived) or intimidation to continue harm or violence, and threatening exposure or abandonment. (“Crossroads”)

The direction of definitional assignment moves from the conceptual to the physical, framing all experiences of trafficking as intelligible by the same experiences of force, fraud, and coercion.

This pattern in definition use constructs an essential victim who is helplessly exploited.

These are essentially ‘frame traps’, as theorized by Goffman, and are more clearly so in light of the few exceptions to the pattern I found of deductive definition use across the majority of organizations. Fewer than ten percent of the organizations analyzed offered grounded-theory descriptive definitions in which the differences of victims were incorporated into an inductive understanding of human trafficking. Inductive definitions framed victims as people with some capacity of agency, notable in the verbs and demographic descriptions included in these examples.

Essentially, human trafficking is the severe exploitation of someone for the purposes of sex or labor through force, fraud or coercion. Victims and survivors of human trafficking include children, women and men, and come from different races and religions. [Trafficking] has many faces and includes more situations than many people realize. But the common elements are clear — someone with more relative power targeting someone with a social vulnerability and compelling (physically or psychologically) that person to work or provide commercial sexual services. (“Alight Alliance”)

What is sex trafficking? Sex trafficking is forcing someone else – whether through fraud, coercion or threat of violence – to engage in a commercial sex act. Commercial sex acts are any sexual acts performed in exchange for money, drugs or other items. Not all commercial sex acts are instances of trafficking. (“Coalition on Human Trafficking”)

These examples use “or” instead of “and” between descriptive terms and explained human trafficking as a relationship and interaction involving a victim, which situated the victim as an actor instead of an object in exploitation. Victims were described as people working in recognizable industries, and different varieties of trafficking were briefly explained. The following excerpt is an example representative of the contrast provided by the minority of organizations which framed victimhood with degrees of variability.

Myth: Human trafficking is only sex trafficking. Fact: Sex trafficking exists, but it is not the only type of human trafficking. Forced labor is another type of human trafficking; both involve exploitation of people. Victims are found in legitimate and illegitimate labor industries, including sweatshops, massage parlors, agriculture, restaurants, hotels, and domestic service. (“Fight to End Exploitation”)

The descriptions of victims ‘found in legitimate and illegitimate labor industries’ portray victims as relatable beings struggling with unfair labor and exploitation. The incorporation of nuance and complexity in inductive definitions of victimhood disrupt the ‘frame traps’ produced in the deductive constructions, and ultimately more options for agency are attributed to victims. In other words, deductive representations offered a monolithic construction of a brutalized victim with insufficient agency, while inductive definitions implied more variability in victims’ experiences and agency. The majority of organizations portrayed victims as bodies ‘sold over and over again’, which objectify victims as beings less relatable, and more essentialized, to website viewers. The minority of organizations used descriptive, inductive definitions of victims as found in both ‘legitimate and illegitimate businesses’ which did not essentialize victims.

This subtheme examined how the deductive use of definitions constructed victims as objects of exploitation, and the inductive use of definitions underscored how variations in experiences of trafficking constructed victims as actors in experiences of exploitation. The deductive definitions objectified victims through emphasizing force, fraud, and coercion used to sell victims, and victims’ experiences were implied as unvaried. These representations of essentialized victims construct victims’ agency as insufficient to resist the sale of their bodies or their involvement in ‘the second largest and fastest growing criminal industry worldwide’. The next subtheme builds upon the first two and examines how organizations used representations of victims’ appearances and needs to construct victimhood.

*Rhetorical use of victims' appearances and needs in anti-trafficking advocacy*

The appearances and needs attributed to victims of human trafficking by anti-trafficking organizations constructed victims as 'others' who lacked sufficient agency. Constructions of victimhood as an otherhood were evident in the ways organizations used race, the appearance of helplessness, and descriptions of victims' inability to meet their own needs, all of which reflect a victim whose agency is insufficient for self-exit and self-advocacy.

When describing victims, organizations make choices about what to include and what to exclude as they convey a certain understanding of victimhood, and analyses of these representations provided insight into constructions of victims' agency. Nearly all of the organizations used images or descriptions portraying both victims and survivors on their websites, and many included lists and anecdotes describing their interpretations of victims' greatest needs. Together, the images, lists, and anecdotes constructed a victim that is exotic and helpless, which is what I refer to as an otherhood in order to highlight the conceptual distance organizations create between the agentic website viewer and the victims portrayed. I found that the majority of organizations' constructions of victims as others were used to heighten the need for rescue and rehabilitation in that the agency of the other is insufficient for self-exit and advocacy.

Over eighty percent of organizations represented victims with images of conventionally beautiful young women or girls with dirty or brown skin and mixed expressions of fear and sadness on their faces (e.g., "Central Missouri Stop Human Trafficking Coalition"; "End Slavery in Charlotte"; "Human Trafficking Awareness and Advocacy Group"). The victims were often bound with rope or chains, or peering desperately out of a window, or were physically silenced with a visibly dirty male hand over their mouth, or they were mostly nude cowering on a dirty

floor (e.g., “Advocates for Freedom”; “Campaign Against Human Trafficking Southshore”; “Happens Here Too; “Hope Against Trafficking”; “Humans Against Trafficking”; “Innocents at Risk”). Even for organizations which only serve adults, images of girls were used perhaps to emphasize the childlike helplessness of victims in need of services, or to reflect a belief that adult victims were first trafficked as children. The motives for image choice are unclear, but the themes in their use for constructing victimhood were readily observable. Victimhood was portrayed as a dependent state of exploitation affecting young, feminine, and physically isolated individuals whose agency is insufficient to change their circumstances.

In contrast, images used to represent survivors almost exclusively included women with white or very light skin in well-lit living rooms, smiling and laughing, running through a grassy field wearing a white dress, or receiving a hug from a motherly staff member (e.g., “Disrupting Traffick”; “Campaign Against Human Trafficking Southshore”; “Agape International Missions”; “Ascent 121”). The rhetorical use of these images attributed darker skin tones and despair to victims and lighter skin tones and happiness to survivors. And in this way race was used to emphasize victims as exotic, sexually racialized others.

The pattern of contrasting dark settings and dark skin versus well-lit settings and lighter skin, and in some cases the juxtaposition of barcodes imposed on victim images and doves or butterflies surrounding survivor images, constructed victimhood as a transformation (e.g., “Campaign Against Human Trafficking Southshore”; “Collaboration to End Human Trafficking”; “Eva Center”; “Florida Coalition Against Human Trafficking”; “Florida Dream Center”; “Amirah Inc”). This transformation narrative complements organizations’ agenda to ‘reach, rescue, and restore’ victims in that these images indicate that victims are rescuable and transformable. Representations of victims’ appearances were used to visualize the victim before

rescue, the survivor after rehabilitations, and to emphasize the transformative services of the organization.

Fewer than ten percent of organizations in the study refrained from using juxtaposed darkness-to light images to represent victims and instead used more descriptions of victim demographics. The following excerpts are reflective of the few representations which evoked diverse images of victimhood.

Victims can be men or women, adults or children, foreign nationals or U.S. citizens. Victims have diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, varied levels of education, and may have immigration documents or be undocumented. Traffickers target people who may be more vulnerable because they are runaway and homeless youth, as well as victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, war or conflict, or social discrimination. Foreign nationals who have paid significant recruitment and travel fees often become highly indebted to traffickers or other intermediaries. (“Alaska Institute for Justice”)

Victims of sex trafficking are rarely locked away in some private dungeon. They are held captive in plain view of ordinary people, disguised as relatives or friends of their victimizers. (“Coalition on Human Trafficking”)

These representations constructed victimhood with descriptions relatable with ‘ordinary people’ and described how victims may have ‘diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds’, and notably mentioned that men can be victims of human trafficking. The descriptions and images which used contrasts between darkness and light situated victimhood as an otherhood ‘locked away in some private dungeon’, whereas the organizations which constructed victimhood with diverse descriptions indicated victims were likely more relatable with public audiences. By relatable, I mean that victims are understood as ordinary people with textured identities more similar to than different from the identities of people viewing the website. The leveraging of darkness and race in the images reproduced stereotypes of victims as exotic, sexualized, racialized others who became more relatable, as in less exotic, less sexualized, and whiter, after ‘rescue and rehabilitation’.

Whether victims were portrayed as objectified others experiencing exploitation, as did the majority of organizations, or as individuals whose lives are more ordinary than sensational, as with the minority of organizations, determined the advocacy rhetoric used for ‘reaching and rescuing’ victims. The more victims were othered the more their agency was described as insufficient for self-exit, and lists of ‘warning signs’ were a common way in which this pattern of the othered victim with insufficient agency was repeated.

‘Warning sign’ lists were used by more than seventy-five percent of organizations and provided ‘othered’ representations of victims (e.g., “Alaska Institute for Justice”, “Angel Against Trafficking”, “Chains Interrupted”). The following excerpt is a representative example of the ‘warning signs’ or ‘signs and clues’ most commonly included.

**LOOK FOR CLUES THAT IDENTIFY A POSSIBLE VICTIM OF MODERN-DAY SLAVERY.**

**CONTROLLED BY ANOTHER PERSON:** They are accompanied by a controlling person, and do not speak on his or her own behalf, but instead defer to another person.

**CONTROLLED MOVEMENT:** They are transported to or from work, or live and work at the same place. They show signs that their movements are being controlled.

**LACK OF EARNINGS:** They are unable to keep his or her earnings: it is “withheld for safekeeping.” In many cases, the person owes a debt they are working to pay off.

**FOREIGN, UNFAMILIAR WITH THE LANGUAGE:** They have recently arrived in the country and do not speak the language of the country—or they only know sex-related or labor-related words.

**OVERLY FEARFUL, DEPRESSED, AND SUBMISSIVE BEHAVIOR:** They are frightened to talk to outsiders and authorities since they are closely monitored and controlled by their trafficker(s). They may be fearful, anxious, depressed, overly submissive, and may avoid eye contact.

**BAD HEALTH AND MALNUTRITION:** They may have signs of abuse or signs of being denied food, water, sleep, and/or medical care.

**LACK OF OFFICIAL IDENTIFICATION:** They are not in possession of their passports, identification, or legal documents.

**SIGNS OF PHYSICAL ABUSE:** They may have bruises, scars, and other signs of physical abuse and torture. Victims of human trafficking are often beaten in areas that will not damage their appearance, such as their lower back.

**SUBSTANCE ABUSE:** They may show signs of drug use or drug addiction. They can be forced or coerced into drug use by his or her traffickers, or turn to substance abuse to help cope with his or her enslavement.

**LACK OF TRUST:** They may be distrustful and suspicious. A victim of human trafficking may act as if they distrust any person who offers them assistance or attempts to converse with them.

**LACK OF PERSONAL BELONGINGS:** They may have few or no personal possessions.  
**SIGNS OF DEPENDENCE:** They may demonstrate affection, attachment, or dependence toward their abuser.

**DECEIVED BY A FALSE JOB OFFER:** Their actual job is different from the advertised job they had accepted. Has feelings of being trapped. (“A21”)

Some organizations occasionally used lists which included additional information describing how a victim may have multiple cell phones, hotel room keys, or forms of identification, but the list included above is an example of the most commonly found list of signs and clues among the organizations in this study. Victims were described as controlled, abused, ill, depressed, dependent, and lacking proper identification. Victims were also described with ‘feelings of being trapped’ and acted ‘overly submissive’, which portrayed victims as unable to exercise agency on their own behalf. In sum, these descriptive lists pieced together a construction of victimhood which implied victims’ agency as insufficient for self-advocacy based on observable characteristics of being ‘foreign’, ‘overly fearful’, in ‘bad health’, and ‘distrustful and suspicious’.

These lists are presented as tools to be used by non-victim viewers of the websites to aid them in understanding ‘how to spot a victim’ and ‘what to do if you suspect trafficking’; they were followed by instructions to not make contact with the individual in question, but to instead call 911, a helpline provided by the organization, or U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) (e.g., “Blue Campaign”; “Arizona Against Trafficking”). Organizations offered these lists available for download in printer friendly formats and are described as a way for any interested member of the public to ‘save the life’ of a victim (e.g., “Uprising Wyoming”; “A21”).

However, empirical evidence was not cited as a source of information for creating ‘warning sign’ lists, and interestingly the only source referenced by organizations was the Polaris



Project, which is ironic given that they explicitly discourage the use of ‘warning sign’ lists. Polaris directly challenged the use of these kinds of lists for identifying victims because they misrepresent and sensationalized victims’ experiences. Instead, Polaris encouraged people to understand the context and social factors involved in a situation of exploitation.

For the past two decades, the anti-trafficking field has enlisted the public in the fight against human trafficking by asking people to notice and report general “indicators” or “signs” that a person is in a trafficking situation. Now, with the help of survivors, advocates are beginning to understand more about how trafficking really works – why signs and indicators, without context, are not meaningful indicators of trafficking. The truth is, there are unlikely to be visible “signs” that trafficking is happening – unless you know something else about the situation – unless you know the story. That’s why we are asking people to learn the real *story* of human trafficking. (“Polaris”)

Polaris, as one of only a few organizations which objected to lists of ‘how to spot a victim’, emphasized the importance of context in understanding situations of exploitation. The assertion that ‘there are unlikely to be visible signs’ was a notable objection to organizations which used sensational rhetoric urging members of the public to ‘save the life’ of a victim based on observable otherhood characteristics.

However, the majority of organizations in this study supported the belief that victims can be identified by visible attributes as indicated on ‘warning sign’ lists and represented victims with images which were consistent with those lists. These lists and images portrayed victims as stereotyped helpless others dependent on public actors to correctly diagnose their situation because the victim is not able to act or advocate on their own behalf. In other words, the victims portrayed through ‘warning sign’ lists and dramatic images were portrayed as lacking sufficient agency for self-exit, and that these limitations would be visible. Organizations ‘reach, rescue, and restore’ because victims were constructed to have insufficient agency to self-exit and “don’t often self-identify because of fear, shame, or not understanding what is happening to them is a crime. Each of us, therefore, has the potential to help identify a victim of trafficking if we

understand the warning signs and report suspicious situations” (“Collaborative to end human trafficking”).

Once ‘rescued’, victims were described as ‘rehabilitated’ by organizations. The victims who were portrayed through ‘warning sign’ lists became survivors after they “successfully transitioned out of human trafficking and live happy and healthy lives” (“Central Missouri Stop Human Trafficking Coalition”). The rhetoric used to describe the victim to survivor transformation was often underpinned by moral goals and required that victims make personal changes to fit the organizations’ agenda. For example, “daytime programs focus on personal & spiritual growth, along with physical and educational opportunities” (“Sanctum House”) and “the very same girls [victims of trafficking] who have been known as bringing the value of the city down are going to be part of bringing life and restoration back to the city” (“Beloved Atlanta”). Victims were described as requiring ‘personal and spiritual growth’ and needing to be reformed into citizens who would ‘bring life and restoration back to the city’.

The following excerpts are broadly reflective of the ways in which organizations framed the need for and desired outcomes of the personal changes victims were expected to make when receiving services.

‘Grounds of Grace is a blessing to my life every day. Through my commitment to change and Dana Pfeiffer’s unending support and love, I have found a new way to live.  
(“Grounds of Grace”)

Rehabilitation is a critical step for a survivor to successfully integrate into society. (“Community Campaign Against Human Trafficking West Florida”)

By providing them with the necessary services, support, guidance and love – we can help them transform from victims into survivors as they begin to RESTORE their lives.  
(“Lighthouse for Life”)

The victim as participant was situated as an object of restoration and opportunity for the organization to demonstrate its’ solution to trafficking victimization through ‘restoring’ and

‘finding a new way’ to live. As a general theme, victims were described as needing to be transformed by the moral and social values of the organization.

We believe that love transforms. At Hope Against Trafficking, love allows human trafficking survivors to rebuild, rediscover and rewrite the stories their lives. (“Hope Against Trafficking”)

We believe that when she laughs healing is happening in her life, that she is becoming everything her creator meant her to be: empowered, beautiful, free, strong, forgiven. We believe that when she discovers this hope conquers fear. We believe that hope lives here. (“Amirah Inc”)

For the victim / survivor in this system, even if there is a desire for healing and change, there is a high rate of return to exploitation. As they try to find support in a web of services and resources they often still lack true community and healthy relationship, and so they slip back through the cracks of the broken systems, back to exploitation. (“Massachusetts Coalition to End Human Trafficking”)

Victims’ who received services ‘became everything her creator meant her to be’ and rewrote ‘the stories their lives’ in accordance with the goals of the organizations to transform and rebuild survivors’ lives, but those who lacked organization support had a ‘high rate of return to exploitation’. In these ways, organizations constructed victims as needing rehabilitation before reentering society, indicating that victims were unready, incapable and or not worthy of trust to live on their own in public.

Relationships and interventions are crucial for victims to be connected to proper rehabilitation clinics and begin the journey to living in the freedom they deserve. (“Nashville Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition”)

Thank you to all who support Lost and Found Ministry as it is helping those in recovery to find new faith in the Lord, get their life back, reconnect with their loved ones while having a chance for a future blessed life. (“Haven Hope”)

On account of the extreme trauma and often family abandonment they have experienced at such a young age, many survivors of human trafficking and sexual exploitation need regular support in acquiring everyday skills such as grocery shopping, cooking, personal finance, healthy relationships, self-esteem, setting and achieving goals. (“Purchased”)

These themes are broadly reflective of the association organizations describe between victims' unmet needs and victimization, indicating that organizations are the only resource for addressing victims' needs. If victims did not comply with the program of services offered, they were described as extremely vulnerable to revictimization, as in without the "services available preventing them from returning to the cycle of victimization" ("Grounds of Grace Overcoming Human Trafficking") they would return to trafficking. Unsupervised or unrestored victims were at risk of 'falling through the cracks' or would "end up in jail or prison, or simply disappear due to a lack of specialized long-term care" ("Call to Freedom"). Failing to meet the expectations for personal change were explained as evidence of victims' misused agency in which they did not adhere to the prescribed transformation and put themselves at a greater risk for revictimization. Or in other words, organizations indicated that if victims' chose to break with the rehabilitative program offered and instead relied on their own agency to recover, their needs would be left unmet and create a vulnerability to revictimization. Victims' insufficient agency for self-recovery was highlighted and the authority of the organizations' rehabilitative programs reinforced.

In sum, the construction of victimhood produced through images and descriptions of observable vulnerabilities represented victims as helpless and 'othered'. Key descriptors of victims as 'overly fearful, depressed and submissive' with signs of physical violence contextualized organizations services designed to provide "active recovery and an aspirational knowledge of how to live a purposeful and value-based life" ("Eden House"). This salient theme of organizations describing victims' helplessness in light of the rehabilitative services available indicated an understanding of victims' agency as insufficient for self-exit or care without the guidance of an organization. Moreover, public audiences viewing the websites were urged to use

lists of ‘warning signs’ to ‘save the lives of victims’ and call law or immigration enforcement officers to respond, which contributes to the construction of victimhood as an ‘othered’ status and victims’ agency as insufficient for self-exit.

The second results chapter will explain my second claim, how relational constructions of victimhood described victims’ agency as *misused* and in need of correction, but first I offer a brief analysis of the arguments supporting my first claim as a helpful summary of the subthemes examined thus far.

#### Brief discussion of claim 1: How agency is constructed as insufficient

In review, the rhetorical use of victims’ stories, experiences of exploitation, appearances, and descriptions of their rehabilitative needs in anti-trafficking discourse demonstrate how their agency is constructed as insufficient for self-exit and advocacy. Victims needed to be ‘reached, rescued, and restored’ because their lack of hope, freedom, and worth prevented them from exiting trafficking on their own, and organizations were presented as victims’ best, or frequently only, option for exit and ‘rehabilitation’.

Through organizations’ representations of victims’ stories and thoughts, researchers, victims, survivors, and the general public viewing the websites are all led to see human trafficking victims as helpless and in need of rescue. Victims were portrayed as lacking knowledge and imagination about a different way of living and as lacking hope in their own ability to do anything about their circumstances of exploitation even if they did understand their victim status, indicating that waiting for rescue was their best option. A victim’s future is portrayed as dependent on an individual or organization to step in and offer assistance, which

presents a very simple narrative of desperate victims being set free by kind strangers and law enforcement officers.

However, with fewer than ten exceptions, the organizations in this study did not cite empirical evidence supporting their interpretations of victims' attributes. In the absence of empirical support for warning sign lists and descriptions of victims' needs, it appears that organizations' construct victimhood through less reliable means. With no clear theme emerging, the vast majority of organizations appeared to equally reproduce stereotyped constructions of victimhood from entertainment media (i.e., the movies "Taken" and "The Candy Shop"), political messaging (i.e., about prostitution, immigration, and women's sexuality), and human trafficking myths (see Cunningham & Cromer 2016; de Vries et al. 2019). As these sensationalized and stereotyped constructions of victimhood are reproduced by the majority of advocacy organizations, they gain an appearance of greater legitimacy which ultimately accounts for how they end up in criminal justice literature and in U.S. trafficking policies (Andrijasevic & Mai 2016; Baker 2013; Cojocar 2015; Hoyle et al. 2011; Johnston et al. 2015; Lockyer 2020; Long & Dowdell 2018; Roe-Sepowitz et al. 2014).

That any organization generalizes the nature of thoughts attributed to a victim or survivor of human trafficking without the use of extensive qualitative research is unacceptable, and it is a minor goal of this study to highlight how such generalizations come about. In this chapter I have outlined how organizations rely on abbreviated and stereotyped understandings of victimhood which produce constructions of othered victims whose agency is insufficient for self-advocacy, and the literature on emergency room nurses' interactions with human trafficking victims (Davy 2015; Long & Dowdell 2018) and on legal advocates for victims (de Vries et al. 2019; Hyland 2001; Munro-Kramer et al. 2020) indicate that stereotyped constructions of victims with

insufficient agency for self-exit end up obstructing victims' access to resources. In other words, organizations provide services for individuals who match their constructed victim description, but it is much harder for victims who do not fit the constructed ideal to access these resources. Survivor- and research informed constructions of victimhood, which appreciate the mental-emotional mettle and self-sufficient agency of victims as actors, challenge simple narratives of helplessness and invite deeper questions about victims' options for exercising agency despite stereotypes of helplessness.

What is also missing in the discursive use of survivor stories is any indication of survivors' observations on the economic, cultural, or social factors that contributed to their experiences of human trafficking. In failing to include complex accounts of lived experiences beyond the essentialized victim to survivor transformation on account of the organization's services, organizations construct 'survivor stories' in discourse to be sensationalized anecdotes of helplessness. Organizations used sensational titles such as "How could a "regular girl" from Gorham become a victim of human trafficking? It happened much too easily, for Cathy" ("Courage Lives") and "Kelly's Story: Read the harrowing story of one girl's trafficking experience" ("Shared Hope International") to encourage website viewers to read the survivor stories. The survivor stories were not used to describe the complex oppressions of human trafficking or to describe how victims understood their own agency, they were used as supporting evidence for organizations' advocacy and fundraising campaigns. To doubt that survivors do not have any knowledge to share about anything beyond a shocking account of helplessness and exploitation is a naïve assumption at best and epistemic violence at worst.

Moreover, organizations' services and staff members were presented as the singular source of hope for victims, and victims were unilaterally described as otherwise lacking hope,

freedom, and belief in an alternative future. Victims' purported transformations from a hopelessness and undignified life to one that is empowered and fruitful implies a sort of salvation through work ethic as Weber theorized. This oversimplified narrative of transformation suggests victims have been morally degraded through victimization, and they must seek the services of an organization so that "their past can be healed, hope can be restored, and they can be inspired to live fruitful lives" with a restored sense of self-worth, confidence, and empowerment ("Lily Pad Haven"). This construction of victimhood fails to account for the factors that led to victimization in the first place, instead suggesting that victimhood is more directly linked to poor self-esteem, a lack of dignity, and complacency with a fruitless life. It is not a stretch of the sociological imagination to see class, race, and nationality-based arguments supporting this construction of victimhood, and indeed the literature expounds on the links between anti-immigration sentiment in the U.S. and belief in victim stereotypes (e.g., Cunningham & Cromer 2014; de Vries et al. 2019; O'Brien et al. 2013; Sabon 2016).

When organizations represented victims' experiences as a rate of sale and with broadly applied deductive definitions of trafficking, victims were essentialized as objects in the trafficking interaction. Victims' experiences were represented as events that happen to female bodies, experiences of exploitation were not framed as interactions between two or more agentic actors. For example, broadly reflective descriptions such as "Victims can be sold 15-40 times every 24 hours" ("Selah Freedom") make just as much sense if it were describing how many basketballs are played with at a gymnasium or how rental cars can be acquired at an airport. In these descriptions of victimization there is no attention given to the humanity or agency of victims. This is in part perhaps the point of the rhetorical use of sensational narratives by anti-trafficking organizations, to avoid victim blaming by eliminating victims' agency, but victims in



the descriptions are essentially reduced to objects instead of humans. Victims need to be represented as humans in order for organizations to offer services appropriate for human victims, whereas the most common constructions of victims in this study represent them as objects to be sold, saved, and restored.

Most definitions were not used as a tool for understanding victimhood, they were instead used as a framework for condensing complex experiences into a narrow state characterized by multiple horrors experienced in the same way by all victims. If one is a victim of human trafficking, they have apparently been illegally traded, sold, coerced, raped, assaulted, harbored, transported, beaten, threatened, sexually exploited, physically confined, tortured, and psychologically manipulated. All of these experiences, and more, are likely experienced by victims of human trafficking, but to imply that all must happen to an individual in order to be recognized as a victim is unrealistic and unnecessary. Victims' agency was minimized in these deductive definitions and victimhood was constructed in a top-down fashion using bits of experiences from many victims to describe what trafficking is for any one victim, who ultimately lacks sufficient agency to self-exit or self-advocate.

The few definitions that incorporated more nuance and complexity invited further inquiry and did not rely on shock value to communicate with a reader. Victims were described as situated in imbalanced power dynamics and the organizations pointed to social factors and relational interactions as important components of constructing victimhood. Organizations which used definitions that reflect the more mundane and complex nature of human trafficking also tended to more clearly explain varieties of human trafficking, shedding light on the overrepresentation of sex trafficking (e.g., Barnett 2016; Jones & Kingshott 2016; Logan et al. 2009; Paasche et al. 2018). Using deductive definitions to portray victims' experiences mold

them into a simplified narrative that lay audiences can understand (Andrijasevic & Mai 2016; Hoyle et al. 2011; Nichols et al. 2018), however, these ready-made ways of defining victimhood are inconsistent with the literature and with survivor accounts of how victimization takes place.

The images and descriptions used to represent the appearances of victims reproduced monolithic constructions of victimhood as a state of novel otherhood. Darkness, dirt, physical restraint, and barcode symbols were used to characterize victimhood before organizations rescued and rehabilitated victims into happy, clean survivors gathering in well-lit rooms with butterfly images surrounding the pictures on websites. These representations advance a simple narrative of transformation of the essentialized victim waiting for rescue who can be ‘rehabilitated’ into a “self-sufficient individual, grounded in active recovery and an aspirational knowledge of how to live a purposeful and value-based life” (“Eden House New Orleans”). When viewing only the images presented on the websites, one is tempted to believe that fresh air and the use of soap and warm water are all that one needs to ‘transform’ a victim into a survivor.

The lists of ‘warning signs’ and the solicitation of victims’ commitments for personal change do little to correct such a simplified understanding because they construct victims’ agency as insufficient for ‘resisting re-exploitation’ without the governance of the organization. However, there is again a conspicuous lack of empirical evidence cited on the organization websites to support the needs and appearances of victims, which casts doubt on the accuracy of the constructions and the motivations of the organizations reproducing them.

Organizations which situate victims’ needs and their ‘commitment to change’ in light of organizational goals problematize the individual rather than human trafficking inherently, and in the process of providing services assert paternalistic control over victims’ agency. Victims’ agency is restricted in particular ways by traffickers during exploitation and in other ways by

over eighty-five percent of organizations which offer services post exploitation, which means that the majority of victims who seek services will be subjected to continued scrutiny and governance because their agency is defined as insufficient for self-advocacy. Victims' needs for post-trafficking support with legal, physical, and financial matters remain relevant and difficult to address without assistance, meaning that anti-trafficking organizations are needed, but changes need to be made. To better serve victims, organizations' services need to be grounded in the interests, rights, and lived experiences of victims who are understood as people, not as objects, capable of acting in their own interests.

Ultimately organizations' representations of victims, in terms of the 'voice', thoughts, experiences, and appearances attributed to them, construct a helpless victim who lacks sufficient agency to exit or recover from trafficking without intervention from an organization. 'Survivor stories', objectifying definitions, and 'warning sign' lists were primary ways in which insufficient agency was described and incorporated into a trope of an othered victim waiting for rescue. This chapter has outlined how the othered victim's agency is portrayed as insufficient for self-exit, and the following results chapter will outline how the othered victim's agency is also constructed as misused for self-exit and advocacy. The following results chapter also shifts from using organizations' constructions of victims' attributes as a foundation for understanding victims' agency to focusing on organizations' relational definition of victims' agency. Claim 1 examines how victims' agency is constructed as insufficient and Claim 2 examines how victims' agency is constructed as misused.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS II

In the previous chapter I explained how victims' agency is constructed as *insufficient* for self-exit and advocacy and I focused on the construction of victims based on described characteristics and experiences. In this chapter, I explain how victims' agency is constructed as *misused* and I focus on relational constructions of victimhood in light of other actors' agency. By relational construction I mean that I grouped the themes in the data which described victimhood and victims' agency relative to the ways in which organizations constructed their own actors, interested public actors, and traffickers as actors. This grouping of themes revealed a relational construct of victimhood in which victims' agency was misused for self-exit and advocacy while other actors were portrayed as highly agentic and capable of governing victims' agency. I argue that organizations construct victim's agency as misused, where misused is defined as being unable to act for themselves or tending to act in ways that are ineffective, and that organization actors are portrayed as capable of mitigating victims' misuse of agency.

### Claim 2: Agency as Misused

I define organization actors to include staff members and volunteers who are directly affiliated with an organization. Interested public actors are individuals who donate money, read or purchase educational materials from the organization websites, or who otherwise participate in anti-trafficking campaigns without being a staff member of the organization. Traffickers are the actors in human trafficking interactions who directly coordinate the recruitment, control, and exploitation of victims. Clients and other individuals who contribute to the demand for trafficking or who directly benefit from it are not included in the category of traffickers in this

study. Each of these three groups of actors are examined in the following subsections for how they construct victims' agency as misused, and common themes are identified.

### *Actors in Anti-trafficking Organizations*

Individuals who act on behalf of the organization were portrayed as central to the success of organizations' missions to reach, rescue, and restore victims, and they were constructed as highly knowledgeable and agentic. In contrast, victims were portrayed as needing organizational actors to intervene and protect them from the misuse of their own agency. This contrast is captured in my analytic approach of exploring organizations' relational constructions of victimhood, and in this way, I found organizations to primarily use rescue narratives in constructing victims' agency.

The vast majority of organizations used rescue narratives to represent their actors as agentic heroes physically rescuing victims and as providing continued governance of victims' agency throughout the rehabilitation process to protect victims from misusing their agency. The following excerpts are representative of how rescue narratives positioned organization actors as agentic rescuers.

We are a nonprofit organization fueled by radical hope that human beings everywhere will be rescued from bondage and completely restored. (“A21”)

Nashville Anti-Human Trafficking is a Christ centered team of intervention specialists who rescue and restore women and children from the bondage of human trafficking. (“Nashville Anti-Human Trafficking”)

Organizational actors 'rescued and restored' victims through their ability to intervene and offer 'radical hope' to victims unable to escape 'bondage' on their own. Many organizations used rescue narratives that portrayed their mission like it was a mythical quest with 'monsters' and 'heroes' or as a game to be won. A few explicitly refer to trafficking as being “in the life” or “the

game” and describe the role of rescuers as “Reducing recidivism by breaking bonds of attachment to traffickers and ‘The Game’ lifestyle” (“End The Game”). The following examples are broadly reflective of how organizations evoke quest and game themes in rescue narratives.

Local law enforcement officers are charged with finding these monsters and rescuing victims, but they haven’t had the technology or training to be effective—until now. (“Deliver Fund”)

Chains Interrupted will be a powerhouse fighting against the evils of Human Trafficking until there is Not. One. Slave left in Iowa, the United States...and the world. (“Chains Interrupted”)

Our mission is to reach, rescue and restore all victims of commercial sexual exploitation, that the glory of God may be known. (“Out of Darkness”)

Founded in 2011, our trained operatives are ordinary heroes with a proven track record of over 1,375 rescues and 688 trafficker arrests. (“The Exodus Road”)

These descriptions positioned organizational actors as ‘ordinary heroes’ who share a mission to ‘rescue and restore all victims of commercial sexual exploitation’. Organizations framed victims as helpless, and passive, as in “LET’S DO MORE Thousands more are waiting for our help” (“Rest”). These excerpts are noteworthy because organizational actors are defined as the ones exercising agency by ‘rescuing and restoring’ the ‘thousands’ of waiting victims, which trivializes victims’ agency and implies that victimhood is a state of dependency or helplessness. Victims were not portrayed as heroes or even as capable assistants in rescue missions, their roles were simply to wait and be grateful for rescue.

In contrast, a few organizations (under four percent) did not use rescue narratives and a subset of these challenge the use of rescue narratives and the narrow constructions of victims’ agency within them. For example, the Polaris website observed:

Since 2007, Polaris has operated the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline, which provides 24/7 support and a variety of options for survivors of human trafficking to get connected to help and stay safe. Through a network of nearly 4,000 partner service

providers and trusted law enforcement, trained hotline advocates ... *help survivors build plans so they can safely leave their situations or get the help they need to rebuild their lives*. The National Hotline can communicate via phone in more than 200 languages through a translation service, as well as text, webchat, email, and webform in English and Spanish. (“Polaris”, emphasis mine)

The minority of organizations like Polaris that provided alternatives to rescue narratives constructed victimhood to be an experience or circumstance in which a victim could exercise agency to ‘build plans so they can safely leave their situations’. They offered ‘step by step guidance’ and resources designed for victims to use in planning their own exit strategies, as also demonstrated by The Avery Center website:

We believe that lived experience must inform change. We believe that the best organizations make data-driven decisions, centering the voices of lived experience experts each step of the way. That’s why we base our reports and recommendations in our own lived experiences and survivor-led research. We offer trauma-informed services and survivor-centered programs for those currently and formerly experiencing commercial sexual exploitation. (“The Avery Center”)

And these few addressed victims directly and supported them in their choice to exit.

If you are a victim of human trafficking, know that there is a light at the end of the tunnel for you, too. If it is safe, find out how to get help by calling a hotline or seeking help from various programs nation-wide. We are here for you and we want to help. (“Central Missouri Stop Human Trafficking Coalition Inc.”)

Websites which speak to victims in their viewing audience validated their presence as humans with capacity for agency, which challenged other organizations representations of victims as objects to be rescued. Among the organizations which anticipated victims accessing the website some included a ‘quick exit’ button on the webpage that would quickly exit the website and redirect to a Google search page that would also hide the previous page from most browser viewing histories. This exit button feature positioned victims as able to exercise agency, even in this small way, as they accessed the website in search of information or services to aid them or sought out direct assistance. The absence of such tools on more than 85 percent of websites

signals the expectation that victims would not be seeking out information or services or using their website to execute their own exit strategy. In other words, the majority of organizations represented themselves as actors working to “rescue and restore all victims of commercial sexual exploitation” (“Out of Darkness”) and very few presented alternative narratives which centered the voices or expressed needs victims as ‘experts’ capable of self-exit strategies.

The ways in which organizations raised and defined victims’ ‘choice’ was another notable pattern supporting rescue narratives. Victims’ demonstrations of ‘choice’ were primarily framed in reference to returning to trafficking, not escaping trafficking. Victims were often described as being unable to ‘resist the desire’ or were ‘powerless’ to resist trafficking. Almost forty percent of the organizations directly mentioned victims’ ‘choice’ as an indication of victims’ misused use of agency by choosing to return to trafficking. The following excerpts are representative of the ways in which organizations constructed victims’ ‘choice’.

*Whether resolute to return, wavering in ambivalence, or desperately trying to suppress a desire to return, many victims experience some level of attachment to traffickers and/or “the game.” It is a troubling and perplexing reality that many victims feel powerless to combat. (“Ending the Game”, emphasis mine)*

Call to Freedom estimates that up to 50% of survivors fall through the cracks. Either they *return to “the life”* (streets), end up in jail or prison, or simply disappear due to a lack of specialized long-term care for survivors. (“Call to Freedom”)

There were not services available preventing them from *returning to the cycle of victimization*. We wanted to end this cycle by providing lasting support and rehabilitation, thus Grounds of Grace was founded. (“Grounds of Grace”, emphasis mine)

Victims were represented as caught in a cycle of ‘or desperately trying to suppress a desire to return’ and ‘falling through the cracks’ due to a lack of services for prevention and rehabilitation of the victims’ own agency. Organization actors were positioned as guardians ‘preventing them from returning to the cycle of victimization’ because the victims could not properly use their agency to ‘suppress a desire to return’. Many of these organizations further emphasized rescue



narratives involving heroic organizational actors through descriptions of victims' lack of awareness. For example, "THE HARD TRUTH: Many victims don't even realize they are victims of a crime. They will not report it, even when confronted by the authorities" ("Eastern Carolina Coalition Against Human Trafficking"). Victims were depicted as being in a confused and precarious state because they 'don't even realize they are victims', therefore legitimizing organization actors as rescuers with greater knowledge and authority about trafficking.

The association between constructions of 'choice' and the heroics of organizational actors were more salient among organizations which focused on specific aspects victimhood. Faith-based organizations account for over sixty percent of the organizations in this study. Among these organizations, prayer and a relationship with Jesus were presented as the primary way for victims to remain out of trafficking (e.g., "Araminta Freedom Initiative"; "Beautiful Dream Society"; "Haven Hope"). Faith-based organizational actors were represented as spiritually and physically endowed with the capacity to save wayward victims who were "all challenged to uphold these values and see themselves as a part of a learning and growing community" ("Amirah").

Among organizations which offered residential programs, roughly fifty percent of the organization in this study, clean drug tests, curfews, and mentorship with a staff member were the key components for breaking a survivor's presumed urge to return to trafficking (e.g., "Ascent 121"; "Collective Liberty"; "Nashville Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition"). Victims' 'choice' was constructed as misused because of a 'troubling and perplexing reality that many victims feel powerless to combat' ("Ending the Game"), indicating agency was framed as 'troubling' when victims' choices were perceived as out of alignment with the desires of the organization.

Treatment narratives were very similar to rescue narratives in how they framed organizational actors' use of agency as central to services and programs which governed victims' choices. The following excerpts demonstrate how human trafficking was portrayed using clinical metaphors and victimization was represented as a symptom.

Human trafficking and slavery is a preventable disease we can stop today. ("Awareness is Prevention")

No neighborhood or ZIP Code is immune. Fight the New Drug. ("Coalition on Human Trafficking")

A woman has not been freed from human trafficking until she has been freed from addiction. ("Nashville Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition")

Describing victimhood as a 'preventable disease' and trafficking as 'a new drug' infecting every community constructed agency as misused because victims were caught up in an epidemic or 'addiction' and unable to be cured without intervention. Such intervention often took the form of supervision. Victims' agency had to be supervised because "Much like domestic violence or substance abuse, relapse is an anticipated component of recovery" ("Ascent 121"). The excerpts below are broadly reflective of how recovering victims were frequently likened to patients in drug rehabilitation programs who needed monitoring and correction.

Ending The Game is a first-of-its-kind 'coercion resiliency' curriculum that reduces feelings of attachment to traffickers and/or a lifestyle characterized by commercial sexual exploitation, thereby reducing the rate of recidivism among sex trafficking survivors. ("Ending The Game")

Human trafficking and addiction go hand in hand. Consistent access to drugs and other addictive substances is one of the crucial ways traffickers keep women trapped in the vicious, life-stealing human trafficking cycle. Overcoming this addiction is absolutely necessary for these women to break free. This is the vital part of the rescue process that is often overlooked. ("Nashville Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition")

Treatment narratives were used to construct victims' 'choice' in returning to trafficking as an addiction to overcome, where breaking addiction and attachment were tasks of organizational

actors. It should be noted that organizations do not specify if victims had preexisting histories of drug use, if they are forced into an addiction, or if they develop addictions as a coping strategy. Alternatively, the literature describes how forced alcohol consumption is used as a tactic for control by traffickers (see Cornforth-Camden 2018; Viuhko 2019), but mentions of alcohol abuse are surprisingly absent on organization websites. That organizations portray victims as commonly struggling with drug addiction, without mention of forced alcohol abuse, is a curious choice in representation. Yet time and again, organizations constructed ‘facts’ such as “trafficking is an addiction” (“Nashville Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition”) and “addicted and bound to her trafficker” (“Courage Lives”) to justify intervention treatment. By constructing victims as tending to make choices that endanger themselves because of feelings of attachment and addiction to “a lifestyle characterized by commercial sexual exploitation” (“The Game”) they reify the victims having misused agency.

This subsection described how actors in organizations positioned themselves as rescuers and defined themselves as practitioners of services and treatments deemed essential for governing victims’ ‘choice’. Both rescue and treatment narratives portrayed victims as unable to exercise agency in choice appropriately, and organizational actors needed to protect them from their own misused agency. In the next subsection, I further demonstrate this pattern of constructing agency as misused by addressing the ways in which anti-trafficking organizations involve public actors in advocacy discourse and rescue narratives.

### *Interested public actors*

WHAT’S YOUR STORY? Maybe you’re here because you want to make a difference in ending sex trafficking in your community. You’re aware that this is happening in your own backyard, but it feels too big of a problem to solve alone. We understand how it feels to feel overwhelmed by the problem of trafficking, and that’s why we’ve created a bridge for you to get informed and get involved through this website. We know that it is

only through all of us working together that we can end sex trafficking for good. You are not alone, and you are needed in this work. Everything you are, every skill or talent you have, every sacrifice you make for the cause, no matter what it is, is important. You can part of a bigger picture and can actually make a difference in ending exploitation. Below are a few of the ways you can join us to make a difference! (“Abolition Now”)

**DO SOMETHING, DONATE!** We count on contributions from our community to continue our message of hope. There are many ways that you can contribute. It can be a long process to transition out of a trafficking situation and we want to be able to help these people fully and set them up for success. (“Central Missouri Stop Human Trafficking Coalition Inc.”)

Organizations encouraged public actors to use ‘every skill or talent you have, every sacrifice you make for the cause, no matter what it is, is important’, which frames organizations as authoritative instructors on agency in anti-trafficking advocacy. Public actors were represented as distressed but agentic and could ‘help these people fully and set them up for success’, where ‘these people’ referred to victims of human trafficking with proportionally less agency and authority. In addressing the concerns of public actors who ‘feel overwhelmed by the problem of trafficking’, organizations reassured them of their agency to ‘join us and make a difference’ while also positioning victims as a distant ‘those people’ who, by comparison, lack basic needs and agency. Organizations explained that “trafficking is not a new phenomenon, but caring about it is” (“Love146”), and encouraged public actors to “stand up as a world community against those who still engage in the criminal act of buying and selling human beings” (“505 Get Free”). In these ways, through ‘caring about it’ and ‘standing up’ against trafficking, public actors were portrayed as having “a variety of ways [to] help - join in the fight to combat this horrific crime” (“Eastern Carolina Coalition Against Human Trafficking”).

Over ninety percent of the anti-trafficking organization websites in this study used rhetoric designed for speaking to a public audience generally uninformed about and shocked by human trafficking. Descriptors of public actors as “overwhelmed”, “feeling like the world is

getting worse”, and having “defiant hope” were most common (e.g., “New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking”, “Love 146”, and “Phoenix Dream Center”). The constructions of interested public actors as uniformed, ‘overwhelmed’, and eager to help allowed organizations to contextualize organizational actors as having the most agency and victims’ as having misused and childlike agency. Victims were thereby portrayed as dependent on the charity of public actors who took action in following the ‘action steps’ outlined by organizations. The following excerpts are representative of the rhetoric organizations used for situating public actors in supporting roles to actors in organizations ‘ending exploitation’.

The good news is that there are simple things you can do to begin protecting yourself and those around you from sexual predators. Take a few minutes to browse the documents on this page. (“Be The Key”)

This massive problem reaches worldwide, in every corner of civilization. Fighting it, however, is entirely within our grasp. (“Beautiful Dream Center”)

More can be done. Join our fight...a well-informed community is a trafficker’s worse nightmare. Come to our next Task Force meeting. (“SW Michigan Human Trafficking Task Force”)

As these excerpts describe, organizations were represented as having the most authority and knowledge about human trafficking, but public actors could easily join advocacy efforts. Notably the majority of organizations invite public actors, not victims or survivors, to ‘join the fight’ against human trafficking. Public actors were defined as having authority but lacking knowledge. Victims had neither authority nor knowledge to act appropriately on their own behalf.

Furthermore, organizations often treated public actors as a fragile audience which must be warned about the disturbing experiences of human trafficking victims. For example, “WARNING→ Material below may be too disturbing for some” (“For the One”) was a commonly observed header on the websites. While the ‘material’ was potentially disturbing, this rhetoric more so reflected a voyeurism and othering that the organizations promoted. And in this

way public actors were told “Once you know, you will never look away” (“Coalition on Human Trafficking”) and “Do Something. We count on contributions from our community to continue our message of hope” (“Central Missouri Stop Human Trafficking Coalition”). This pattern of reassuring public actors and warning about ‘disturbing’ material was a primary way in which organizations constructed victimhood as a distant otherhood shocking and novel to the public imagination. As others, victims were portrayed as needing immediate help from comparatively much more agentic public actors.

There were several ways in which organizations invited the public to participate in various advocacy efforts, including one-time financial gifts, sponsorship of a victim, or through purchasing a product sold through the organization. Victimhood was constructed as a cause that public actors can easily advocate for, where the motivation for advocacy was to relieve public actors’ sense of overwhelming concern about the ‘other’.

Not knowing how to help stop human trafficking can become overwhelming. NYATN offers easy online access to learn how to be an anti-trafficking advocate. On the “What You Can Do” page, everyone is provided with information, advice, events, and articles on how you can take action on this cause. The posts are also social-media friendly, so you can easily share them with others to join the fight. (“New York Anti Trafficking Network”)

We get it, you're charged up and you want to learn more about EVERYTHING that contributes to the normalization of sex slavery in today's culture! Keep an eye on our UPDATES & EVENTS page for upcoming community training events, or CONTACT US to talk about training for your organization, group or business. (“Sparrow Place”)

A notable pattern was the encouragement organizations gave to the public to act on victims’ behalf. Victims were described as being dependent on ‘all of us working together that we can end sex trafficking for good’. Victims were not *included* in ‘all of us working together’, they were identified as ‘these people’ who needed help. In these ways, victims’ agency was

diminished as a rhetorical device for empowering public actors with ‘easy online access to learn how to be an anti-trafficking advocate’ for victims

The ‘How to Help’ options listed on the websites frequently encouraged public actors to make a financial or material donation, attend a fundraising event, or invite a speaker from the organization to speak at a school or church (e.g., “Coalition to Combat Human Trafficking in Texas”; “Community Coalition Against Human Trafficking”). Financial donations to ‘sponsor a victim’ were the most common way organizations included public audiences as potential actors in the rescue narrative.

**YOU CAN RESCUE A GIRL FROM TRAFFICKING EVERY YEAR** Children are sent away from home to be sold for sex. Your donation of \$84/month can rescue a girl every year. Be part of her freedom journey today! (“Agape International Missions”)

There are 27-30 million people in slavery today. This is more than at any time in human history. The average cost of a slave around the world is \$90. \$18 a day can change a girl or boy’s life forever. (“Partners Against Trafficking Humans”)

Use our 30 Actions 30 Days toolkit to see how you can do one thing every day to #ConfrontHumanTrafficking. Great for groups or individuals who want to take action! (“Art Works for Freedom”)

What if you could change THEIR world? ONE MILLION DOLLARS. ONE GOAL. (“Humans Against Trafficking”)

These statements represented public actors as having the ability to change ‘their world’, meaning the experiences of human trafficking victims, with financial donations. Agency for rescuing, saving, and changing the lives of victims was granted to public actors who ‘want to take action’ to ‘rescue a girl every year’ or on behalf of ‘a slave’, which represented victims as colonized others waiting to be rescued by online donations from public actors. Again, these organizations served adult victims but used ‘girl’ and ‘boy’ in advocacy discourse, perhaps to reflect a belief that adult victims are first trafficked as teenagers or the reflect the ways in which ‘girl’ and ‘woman’ can refer to the same age category in sex work as in “call girl” or “working girl”.

In addition to general requests for donations, organizations frequently requested financial support from public actors through offering menus of specific items available for purchase for a sponsored victim. These lists represented victims as unable to acquire basic hygiene items or other daily needs without the assistance of public actors, which evokes understandings of victims as similar to refugees or homeless people who are unable to provide for themselves. A typical ‘wish list’ of items available to purchase for a sponsored victim is included below.

BUY Trauma Therapy sessions – \$70 – \$300, Gas card – \$20, Grocery card – \$40, Vet services for therapy animals – \$50, Emergency Lodging – \$50-\$350, A month of cell phone service – \$60. APPAREL: Sweatshirts, T-shirts. WISHLIST: Toilet Paper, Toothpaste, Toothbrushes, Paper Towels, Dishwasher Soap, Laundry Soap, Dryer Sheets, Body Wash, Deodorant, Shampoo, Conditioner, Hand Soap, Febreze, Body Lotion, Feminine Products. (“Central Missouri Stop Human Trafficking Coalition Inc”)

The itemized lists represented a way for public actors to exercise their agency in providing for the basic needs of sponsored victims, who were portrayed ‘rescued’ for ‘\$84/month’. Public actors were also invited to purchase “Hand crafted gifts made by survivors of human trafficking” (“Sanctum House”) or follow a link to “The Survivor Made store” which “has something for everyone on your Christmas list!” (“Refuge for Women”). Victimhood was portrayed as an otherhood from which a public actor could collect a souvenir of their financial support, which relationally fetishizes and defines victims as colonized others making handicrafts in exchange for the benevolence of public actors. Further, victimhood was constructed as a dependent state of being where public actors can purchase rehabilitation for victims through online donations, which “no matter the amount, will help combat this growing plague in our community” (“Helping to Educate and Advocate Against Human Trafficking”). Without intervention, victims were portrayed as misusing their agency for self-advocacy and for ‘combating this growing plague’.



Analyzing how organizations situated interested public actors relative to constructions of victimhood revealed the ways in which organizations manipulated representations of agency to encourage financial donations on the organization websites. Victims' agency was minimized and 'othered' in comparison to the agency exercised by public actors on behalf of victims. In this way victims' agency was portrayed as misused for victims to meet their basic needs without help from public actors who could choose from "462 actions you can take now" ("End Slavery Now"). Moreover, organizations described financial support as a way for public actors to ease their concerns about 'the normalization of sex slavery'. The central observation from this subsection on organizations' constructions of public actors is the way in which victims are situated as materially and financially dependent on the agency of public actors.

### *Traffickers as actors*

In addition to public and organization actors, constructions of victimhood and victims' agency were also shaped by anti-trafficking organizations' descriptions of traffickers. Half of the organizations in the study did not mention traffickers directly; the remaining half represented traffickers as cunning and violent. Representations of traffickers constructed victims' agency as misused for self-advocacy in two ways. First, traffickers were described as preying on individuals with marginalized identities. Secondly, traffickers were described as adopting 'Romeo type' strategies (e.g., "Awaken"; "Community Coalition Against Human Trafficking")

The following excerpts are representative of the ways in which marginalized circumstances and identities were used to explain victims' inability to exercise agency for their own protection.

They look for people who are susceptible for a variety of reasons, including psychological or emotional vulnerability, economic hardship, lack of a social safety net, natural disasters, or political instability. The trauma caused by the traffickers can be so

great that many may not identify themselves as victims or ask for help, even in highly public settings. (“Blue Campaign”)

Victims may be highly skilled and may come to the U.S. on legitimate visas with the promise of lawful work. They are enslaved not only through physical restraint, but also through coercion, fear or intimidation. In today’s global economy, workers can be enslaved by threats of deportation, debt bondage or merely a lack of viable alternatives. (“Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking”)

These descriptions were used to imply victimization was nearly inevitable for ‘people who are susceptible’ and vulnerable due to financial, citizenship, or ‘psychological or emotional’ difficulties, because traffickers were able to “take advantage of vulnerable persons with false promises or physical abduction” (“Eastern Carolina Coalition Against Human Trafficking”). These difficulties were tied to victims’ identities and circumstances that created vulnerabilities traffickers ‘preyed’ upon. For example, “compromised legal status, limited English proficiency, LGBTQ+ identity, homelessness, member of a marginalized social group, history of sexual abuse, or experience in the foster care system” were described by the Greater New Orleans Human Trafficking as conditions that increased the likelihood of victimization. To be sure, there are social, legal, and material conditions that may put people at risk, but my focus is on how the relationship between traffickers, victims, and organizations were represented by these organizations. For instance, “North Star Initiative” explains that “In reality, most are easy prey for traffickers who promise good jobs, money, and drugs; instead, they become trapped in a life of violence and sexual slavery”. Victims were described as unable to act on their own behalf to prevent victimization or ‘ask for help, even in highly public settings’, implying that victims’ agency was misused for protection and advocacy.

Organizations were portrayed as having vital knowledge about the strategies traffickers used to ‘enslave’ otherwise skilled victims, but victims were portrayed as unaware of or unable to mitigate their own vulnerabilities to trafficking. In particular, the connections organizations

made between potential victim vulnerabilities and traffickers' ability to "use whatever means necessary" ("Happens Here Too") relied on vague references to immigration bias and assumptions of victims as helpless and female.

A majority of the organizations emphasized a Romeo narrative whereby women's naïve choices were the greatest vulnerability to exploitation. These narratives present victims as uninformed women who acted poorly in light of their vulnerabilities. The following excerpts are broadly reflective of the ways in which organizations faulted victims' misused agency in romantic relationships as a cause of victimization.

Many traffickers manipulate their victim by first representing themselves by pretending they are in love with their victim and quickly use their victims trust and loyalty to coerce them into "prostitution". Other victims are lured into sex trafficking through false promises of modeling, singing or dancing careers. Additionally, some are forced into sexual acts for money by their family or family friends. Victims are typically recruited into sex trafficking when they lack social support, have been victims of other forms of abuse and/or are financially unstable. Traffickers uses these vulnerabilities against a victim. ("Angel Against Trafficking")

A majority recruit their victims through a tactic known as "Boy-friending", in which the trafficker plays the role of a boyfriend or father figure in a young girl's life and showers her with gifts and affection. The goal of this tactic is to gain her trust by convincing the victim she is in love; this ultimately isolates the victim from family and friends, making the victim dependent on the trafficker for all of her needs and attention. ("Living in Liberty")

Traffickers were described as 'using romance and promises to convince the victim to enter into prostitution' and 'pretending they are in love with their victim' as means of gaining control over victims' agency. These descriptions portrayed victims as 'lured', as giving 'trust and loyalty' to traffickers, and as easily duped by falling 'in love' with the trafficker. It is noteworthy the gendered language in these excerpts implies that victims are female, or that only female victims are susceptible to these trafficker strategies. These representations construct victims' agency as

misused because victims are defined as being easily deceived and duped by illusions of trust and romance or as being taken in by false job offers.

Traffickers were often described as people whom victims knew and regarded as business owners, family members, or friends. Relationally defined, victims were thereby portrayed as exercising poor judgement in entering into relationships or jobs with individuals who were traffickers.

Some use their privilege, wealth, and power as a means of control while others experience the same socio-economic oppression as their victims. They include individuals, business owners, members of a gang or network, parents or family members of victims, intimate partners, owners of farms or restaurants, and powerful corporate executives and government representatives. (“National Human Trafficking Hotline”)

Most often, victims of trafficking aren’t trafficked by strangers; they are trafficked by someone they know: a family member or a romantic partner – someone who sees their vulnerabilities and uses those vulnerabilities to abuse and exploit them. (“Community Coalition Against Human Trafficking”)

What Sarah didn’t know was that her boyfriend worked for a human trafficker, spotting girls he could manipulate quickly and bring to the trafficker. He had already sold Sarah to him. When Sarah got in the car with the new friend, she didn’t realize that she was crossing the threshold into slavery ... participating in her own abduction. (“Deliver Fund”)

The relational construction of victims’ agency in light of how organizations portray traffickers indicates that victims’ agency is misused due to disadvantages associated with gender, language, trust, and overall judgment of legitimacy in relationships. Organizations presented themselves as suitable rescuers of victims who had marginalized identities and poor judgment in occupational and personal relationships. Commonly used explanations that “Unfortunately, traffickers adapt quickly. This means we must be even quicker, and present a united front” (“Collective Liberty”), and “All traffickers are barbaric” (“Deliver Fund”) were used to emphasize the exceptional agency of traffickers against which victims were ‘easy prey’ (“North Star Initiative”). The majority of organizations implied that victims’ vulnerabilities and misused agency were

explainable through female vulnerabilities to ‘boy-friending’ strategies and being tricked through promises of ‘dancing and singing’ careers but explanations were not always explicit. In sum, traffickers were portrayed as cunning and agentic actors systematically exploiting victims’ who could not properly use their agency to self-advocate, but for whom organizations could intervene.

Together, constructions of organizational, public, and trafficker actors were used to relationally define victims as misusing their agency for protection, for self-exit, and for recovery. Organizational actors, often with the assistance of public actors, were portrayed as rescuing and rehabilitating victims who had ‘disturbing experiences’ of exploitation because traffickers could ‘use any means necessary’ to control them. In this interaction between organizational, public, and trafficker actors, victims were portrayed as naïve and helpless others who cannot be trusted to use their agency on their own behalf.

#### Brief discussion of claim 2: How agency is constructed as misused

Claim 1 showed how organizations constructed the insufficiencies of victims’ agency through the attributes given to victims. Claim 2 showed how victims’ agency was relationally constructed as misused in light of the authority and agency attributed to organizational, public, and trafficker actors.

Organizational actors were situated as guardians in rescue and treatment narratives who were responsible for protecting victims from their own misused agency, particularly in light of victims ‘troubling desire’ to return to trafficking. Victims were described as having drug addictions and victimhood was framed with clinical metaphors engendering fear that “No neighborhood or ZIP Code is immune. Fight the New Drug” (“Coalition on Human

Trafficking”). Moreover, organizations contextualized the authority and heroics of their actors with descriptions of why victims were not able to exit or ask for help on their own. Victims were described as often not knowing that they were victims or were too ashamed to admit it (e.g., “Eastern Carolina Coalition Against Human Trafficking”; “Happens Here Too”). In this way organizational actors were constructed as having superior knowledge and best intentions qualifying them to act on behalf of victims, which constructed victims as incapable of properly understanding their situation or appropriately addressing it without guidance.

Rescue narratives are problematic because they encourage abbreviated assumptions about victims physical and mental-emotional states, they frame victims’ choices as damaging their own well-being, and ultimately uncritically attribute authority and agency to organizational actors to ‘rescue and restore’ victims. Organization actors were situated as rescuers, parole officers, addictions counselors, and spiritual advisors while victims were portrayed as needy, addicted, and deviant individuals who must be restored to the organizations’ definition of an upstanding citizen.

Interested public actors were invited to participate in rescue narratives where the emphasis on their capacities for exercising agency eclipsed the capacity and relevance of victim’s agency. Organizations described public actors’ role in rescuing victims as simple and easily accessible with “many ways to get involved -- many of which require little time, travel or cost for you” (“Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Task Force). Relationally, these constructions suggested that victims were that much more incompetent to help themselves in the ways that public actors could so easily help. Organizations’ constructions of public actors’ as co-rescuers in anti-trafficking advocacy implied anyone, any non-victim, could take part in ‘saving

a life'. In this way victims were constructed as in need of saving because their own agency was faulty or misused for self-advocacy.

Organizations most commonly urged public actors to take action through making a financial donation to the organization. Interestingly, this rhetoric portrayed victims as 'others' who needed to be sponsored in the same way that one might sponsor an endangered animal through the World Wildlife Fund. Contrast, for example, the endangered species rhetoric and anti-trafficking rhetoric which asks public actors to sponsor causes and purchase fundraising souvenirs.

Give monthly and help protect polar bears and other species. Join Panda Nation- Run a race, celebrate a birthday, or honor our planet- and raise money to help protect wildlife and their habitats. ("World Wildlife Fund")

Your donation of \$84/month can rescue a girl every year. Be part of her freedom journey today! ("Agape International Missions")

Although it is a harsh comparison to make, the rhetoric used by both interest groups is nearly identical. Anti-trafficking organizations also frequently offer tickets to gala fundraising event, host 5K races, and sell 'survivor made' gifts (e.g., "For the One"; "Call to Freedom"; "Central Missouri Stop Human Trafficking Coalition Inc."; "Refuge for Women"; "Battlement to the Bells"). Constructing victimhood as an exotic otherhood, similar to the plight of endangered polar bears, portrays victims' agency as not suitable to acting on their own behalf.

In such cases, victims and survivors were paradoxically objectified and othered as a novelty group by organizations that advertise items made by survivors available for purchase. Individuals are or who have been commodified through human trafficking were fetishized and represented as selling points. For example, Courage Lives promotes "Freedom Formula sea salt bath scrub. Made by survivors of human trafficking in Maine, this natural salt bath scrub delights

the senses with essential oils and soothes the skin with sea salt” (“Courage Lives”). Likewise, Sanctum House offers “Hand crafted gifts made by survivors of human trafficking” (“Sanctum House”). Even if it is economically beneficial to the organization to offer a gift shop, advertising items as survivor made degrades victims’ and survivors’ individual experiences and agency through the commodification of their victimhood. Ironically, commodifying victimhood in this way to solicit financial donations ignores the reality of mass-produced commodities made by trafficked labor in many industries. This irony indicates that many organizations conflate human trafficking with sex trafficking and ignore the pervasive use of trafficked labor in meat packing plants, apparel commodity chains, produce farms, and hotel industries entirely (Logan et al. 2009; Viuhko 2019). Victims’ agency was framed as misused for self-recovery and advocacy, but was alternatively portrayed as suitable for making crafts and gifts.

Traffickers, like public and organization actors, were represented as exceptionally agentic actors in their abilities to deceive and control victims who were relationally constructed as naïve and vulnerable. Abbreviated representations of victimization indicated that people who experience marginalization or oppression because of their identity will not be able to avoid traffickers who “use whatever means necessary to obtain and maintain control of their victims” (“Happens Here Too”). In this way, the appropriate use of victim’s agency was defined as seeking services from an organization, not to address their victimization on their own. Organizations certainly offer more resources than an individual may have access to on their own, but organizations portray their services as the only option, not an additional option, for victims with marginalized identities. Victims were the only individuals represented without agency suitable for making personal, occupational, and advocacy choices.



A final important component of these representations of victims is the ubiquity with which trafficking victimhood is represented as a primarily female experience. Constructions of *sex trafficking* victimhood were used to represent *human trafficking* victimhood broadly and did not reflect the existence of male victims of *human trafficking*, or that traffickers are also often females (Hebert 2016). Representative explanations on organizations' websites such as "The overwhelming majority of human trafficking victims are women and girls, most of whom are bought and sold in the multi-billion-dollar sex trade, where they suffer extreme violence at the hands of exploiters" ("Coalition Against Human Trafficking in Women") and "96% of trafficking victims are female" ("Deliver Fund") contributed to a feminization of victims' agency and conflates sex trafficking specifically with human trafficking generally. Broadly assuming that '96%' of all human trafficking victims are female legitimized organizations' construction of victims as needing supervision for making choices about romantic partners or accepting jobs, and portrayed victims as more feminine and rescuable. Similarly, organizations imply that victims with marginalized identities naively enter risky relationships and are targeted for exploitation because of their limited resources. However, the literature indicates that this is often a misrepresentation of women's attempts to financially support family members through limited options for employment due to a lack of education and gender equity in the labor market (e.g., Baker 2013; Cockbain & Bowers 2019; Hyland 2001; Le 2016). In these ways, the feminization of victimhood often conflates victims' limited options for employment with naïvely trusting, or misusing agency to accept, employers' offers.

In summary, victims' agency was constructed as misused through representations of victims as addicted to a lifestyle of exploitation, as 'others' unable to care for themselves properly, and as naïve women who have wandered into blindly into the clever schemes of

traffickers. These constructions were produced in relation to constructions of organizational, public, and traffickers as actors who were all portrayed as highly agentic, while victims were dependent on intervention to protect them from continuing to misuse their agency. The victim as object with insufficient agency for self-exit, as explained in the previous chapter, and the relational construct of the othered victim misusing their agency, explained in this chapter, describe one monolithic victim in need of 'rescue and rehabilitation'. The discussion chapter will further explore the striking ubiquity with which this monolithic construct of victimhood is used in anti-trafficking advocacy.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The core argument I make in this thesis is that the majority of anti-trafficking organizations construct victims' agency as insufficient and misused for self-advocacy. Using inductive thematic content analysis, I identified broad themes in the construction of victimhood across 264 anti-trafficking organization websites in the U.S. which serve adult victims of human trafficking. My research question asked how anti-trafficking organizations construct victims' agency. I demonstrate how organizations advance specific understandings of victims, victimization, and capacity for action through the use 'survivor stories', descriptions of exploitation, definitions, images, rescue narratives, and relational comparisons with other actors. I argue these narratives construct victims as objects with insufficient agency for self-exit and as having a propensity to misuse their agency for self-advocacy.

In arriving at my two key claims, 1) victims' agency is constructed as insufficient for self-exit and advocacy and 2) victims' agency is constructed as misused and in need of correction, I analyzed how the victim construct relied heavily on representations of victims as objectified and othered, and as sexually racialized. Victims were represented as being without hope, freedom, and self-worth and these qualities were offered as reasons why victims were unable to exit trafficking on their own, and therefore why organizations needed to 'reach, rescue, and restore' victims. Organizations implied that victims' best, or often only, choice was to wait for intervention. 'Warning sign' lists contributed to the othering of victims as clearly different from the public actor who could 'spot a victim' and 'save a life'. Victims' vulnerabilities and misused agency were frequently constructed through narratives about women's gullibility for traffickers' 'boy-friending' strategies and fake job offers, and the underrepresentation of male

victims' experiences. Relying heavily on othered, objectified, and gendered representations, organizations constructed victims' agency as insufficient and misused for self-exit and self-advocacy. The same pattern of the victim construct with insufficient and misused agency appeared across organizations regardless of the organization's political, religious, geographical, or NGO status. In other words, I did not find that these characteristics influenced the construction of victimhood.

Criminal justice perspectives helped to explain the presence of human trafficking as a crime that can take place in any location, but they do not address the process of or significance of the ways in which anti-trafficking organizations construct victimhood in advocacy discourse as part of the problem. Similarly, human trafficking literature describes issues of misrepresentation and sensationalism with constructions of victimhood but does not sufficiently theorize victims' agency and options for actions as constructed in advocacy discourse. Therefore, I turn to the sociological literature on organizations and institutions to explain the significance of my findings. This chapter unfolds with a discussion of my findings in light of institutional theory, which is laid out in three overlapping arguments, and concludes with a section on the limitations and recommendations of this thesis.

#### Consideration of the findings in light of institutional theory

Working with the definition of institution as "shared rules and typifications that identify categories of social actors and their appropriate activities or relationships" (Barley & Tolbert 1997:96), anti-trafficking advocacy can be understood as an institution with templates of action for different categories of social actors and their interactions. Victims are a category, traffickers another, and individuals working or supporting anti-trafficking organizations another.

I draw on institutional theory to make three arguments about the relevance of my findings: (1) Organizations construct themselves as actors and victims as nonactors (2) Constructions of victims as nonactors restrict their options for action (3) Processes of institutional isomorphic change explain the consistent construction of the nonactor victim among organizations.

Withing sociology, institutional theory was significantly cultivated by John Meyer as a theory to “reconceptualize the sociology of education” in order to “give it a less individualistic picture” and understand the broader function and phenomenology of education through theorizing “more about labeling, credentialing, and creating categories – more institutional in a word” (Jepperson 2001:2). Institutional theory has similarly been adopted as an efficient theory for analyzing the function and phenomenology of many different organizations including hospitals, international financial firms, universities, and employers of all sorts, with organizations broadly defined as constructions and formal structures of institutionalized cultural environments (Emirbayer & Mische 1998; Jepperson 2001; Meyer 2008). In thinking about anti-trafficking organizations, it is similarly insightful to reconceptualize the construction of victimhood with a less individualistic picture which illuminates the credentialing and categorization of victim representations.

Institutional theory has also undergone a significant shift from ‘old institutionalism’ which explained organizations as embedded in cultural and structural contexts, to post 1970 neo-institutionalisms which “incorporate a tension in the conceptualized actor-environment relation” (Meyer 2008:790). This ‘tension’ reflects how action is constrained and enabled by the structure and environment in which actors are embedded. This reconceptualizing of actors and organizations provides important insight into why anti-trafficking organizations are so patterned

in their reactions to actor-environmental tensions within the institution of anti-trafficking advocacy. Specifically, core concepts of the theory including ‘scripts’ which are “observable, recurrent activities and patterns of interaction characteristic of a particular setting” and how these scripts define roles, or role-sets, through which social actors are able to exercise agency and enact rights in different capacities than they do as individuals, explain how anti-trafficking as an institution simultaneously arises from and constrains social action (Abdelnour et al. 2017:1778). These concepts provide insight into the categories of action created in anti-trafficking organizations and important leverage for understanding the categorization of victims’ agency as insufficient and misused.

*Organizations construct themselves as actors and victims as nonactors*

I draw on the institutional literature to show how the modern actor is a salient feature in the construction of organizational, public, and traffickers as actors on anti-trafficking organization websites, but in contrast, victims are constructed with insufficient and misused agency. The concept of the modern actor has come about through historical and ongoing rationalizations of nature and spirituality which produce the Western understanding of humans as bearing the capacity, authority, and responsibility to change society as a “modifiable vehicle” for their pursuits toward salvation, industrial progress, and justice (Meyer & Jepperson 2000:101). The organization actor is therefore understood to command valid and lawful functions to satisfy personal and social interests, which this thesis finds is reflective of the ways in which public and organization actors are represented by anti-trafficking organizations.

However, neo-institutional theory also observes that notions of the agentic actor as a given condition, or as an attained state, must be replaced with understandings of agency and actorhood as historical and ongoing cultural constructions (Abdelnour et al. 2017).

Understanding actorhood in this way sheds new light on understanding victimhood as a historical and cultural construction in the institutional field of anti-trafficking advocacy, and specifically how victimhood is constructed as a *nonactor* identity. The modern actor is formed through natural and spiritual elements of authority, rationalized and fused in a single imagined entity, with agency for the self, for other actors, for nonactor entities, and for cultural authority or principle (Barley & Tolbert 1997; Meyer & Jepperson 2000).

In contrast, victims of human trafficking were constructed by organizations as *not* having agency for the self or others; instead, they are portrayed as ‘nonactors’. Meyer and Jepperson use the ‘rights of whales’ as a rhetorical subject for explaining the difference between an actor and nonactor. They explain that “whales may be accorded rights of a sort, and validated human actors may represent these rights but whales are not actors. Nor are the ethnic cultures displayed in museums, or fetuses, or interest groups not yet formally organized (e.g., labor or women in premodern societies)” (2000:104). By this logic, I suggest that victims of human trafficking are similarly not organized in a political or cultural sense that allows them to be socially recognized as a group. The nonactor victim identity is an institutionalized role among anti-trafficking organizations. That is, it is a socially constructed template for action with a history of negotiations among actors maintained through ongoing interactions (Barley and Tolbert 1997). It is taken for granted that non-victims are agentic actors, and victims are, in contrast, portrayed as lacking sufficient agency for self-exit or advocacy.

Likewise, organizations construct victimhood as an otherhood and as a philanthropic cause for which actors could advocate. Victims were not constructed with authority to advocate for themselves, they are instead constructed as objects to be rescued and advocated for by modern actors, as in “Our mission is to reach, rescue and restore all victims of commercial

sexual exploitation, that the glory of God may be known” (“Atlanta Dream Center”). Moreover, a nonactor victim is a better object for rescue than an agentic one.

Institutional theory explains that actors are rationalized entities with capacity and responsibility to change society for the benefit of others and for moral principles. In other words, “for an entity with [socially] recognized interests to be seen as a legitimate actor requires another step: the cultural construction of the capacity and authority to act for itself. We argue that in the modern system, this capacity comes from the wider cultural system” (Meyer & Jepperson 2000:104). This description of nonactors suggests that actors have cultural authority to act for the self and others. This stands in contrast to cultural constructions of victims’ as lacking capacities or authorities to act on their own behalf. For instance, rescue narratives are widely used by anti-trafficking organizations tell the heroics of their actors to ‘reach, rescue, and restore’ victims. These victims are portrayed as unable to exit on their own, and for whom organizations must “speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves” (“31:8 Project”). In this way rescue narratives are used to bolster cultural constructions of the modern actor. Organizational and public actors are “in an instant modern actors transform[ed]... they brim with rule-laden and intendedly thoughtful counsel” and as “individuals also stand ready to offer their services as agents” (Meyer & Jepperson 2000:113). Functionally, the construction of the modern actor requires the construction of nonactors in order to maintain groups on behalf of whom actors can exercise their agency, which is evident in the objectification and novel othering of victims portrayed as dependent on rescue and financial sponsorship. In contrast, nonactors remain in need of rescue and charity.

Victims of human trafficking are also denied cultural authority because their experiences are questioned through a moral lens. Female victims of sexual violence are subjected to social



judgments about their involvement with ‘good sex’ defined as “as intimate, private, and romantic,” compared to “‘bad’ sex as commercial, promiscuous, and transitory” because patriarchal culture has “shifted sexuality from a procreative orientation in pre-industrial society to a companionate or relational model under industrial capitalism” (O’Brien et al. 2013:404). Ideas about ‘bad sex’ were raised by organizations which portrayed victimhood as a spreading disease, urging public actors to “Declare it: Not Here! Human trafficking will NOT be tolerated in our communities” (“Not Here”), whereas ideas about ‘good sex’ fit with ideal victim stereotypes perpetuated in the majority of images and survivor stories of innocent women locked away in basements who “need honest hope and honest love to be restored and redeemed” (“Refuge for Women”). Victims’ experiences are interpreted with a historically legitimized cultural template for interpreting women’s sexuality and need for patriarchal governance and rescue, that is reified through the construction of victims’ agency as faulty.

Furthermore, this thesis found that anti-trafficking websites primarily targeted a public audience, with very few exceptions speaking to victims. Victims were therefore primarily dependent on receiving services and accessing resources through organizational or public actors. Institutional theory explains that an individual’s agency is also reflected in “a capacity or quality that stems from resources, rights and obligations tied to the roles and social positions actors occupy” (Abdelnour et al. 2017:1775). Agency in this sense is tied to access and command of resources which vary by social location and roles scripted by institutions, indicating that the ways in which constructions of victims’ agency as insufficient and misused demonstrate a nonactor identity assigned to victims because of the restrictions anti-trafficking organizations place on direct access to resources.

In sum, victimhood can be understood as a ‘nonactor identity’. Victims of human trafficking are not understood as modern actors with cultural authority and direct access to resources, capable of acting on their own behalf. Instead, anti-trafficking organizations presented themselves as having cultural authority to responsibly pursue goals within society and shape cultural histories (Meyer & Jepperson 2000). These shared rules and typifications for different categories of actors serve as scripts which define, shape, and sequence appropriate ‘flows of action’ and reflect action in an institution.

*Constructions of victims as nonactors restrict their options for action*

I also draw on institutional theory because it offers an outline for understanding how anti-trafficking organizations are situated in an institutional field of anti-trafficking advocacy. This field defines options for action. Recurrent patterns of interaction in institutions, or ‘scripts’, are characteristic of particular settings shared by individuals and are useful for understanding the historical accretions of past practices that set conditions for ongoing action in institutions (Barley & Tolbert 1997). The behaviors of actors, Jepperson and Meyer (2021:9) argue, is as much a product of a script as the choice of an actor. These scripts construct, constrain, and define actorhood. For instance, this thesis shows how interactions between organizational actors and victims are a script in which victims are helpless objects of rescue with insufficient agency for self-exit and misused agency for self-recovery. Non-victims in anti-trafficking organizations enact patterns of interaction which characterize their roles as modern actors, while victims are denied cultural authority, direct access to resources, and are therefore situated as nonactors who lack “capacity or authority to act for the self” (Meyer & Jepperson 2000:104).

In addition to understanding how actors are constructed and enact scripts, Barley and Tolbert also talk about the sequencing of interactions in “charting flows of action and scripts” as a way to observe who interacts with whom in what ways at what times, which are essential observations for understanding the interpretations of actors (1997:104). The interpretations of interactions are “important for understanding if other options were considered” by actors interacting within socially constructed templates for action (Barley & Tolbert 1997:105). Constructions of victims’ agency as insufficient for self-exit and misused for self-recovery, and the monolithic victim construct more broadly, do not allow for interpretations of victimhood in which ‘other options were considered’ by victims. Victims’ only options for action are scripted, within the institution of anti-trafficking advocacy, as waiting for rescue and depending on intervention to govern their rehabilitation.

In the discursive field of anti-trafficking advocacy, the actors with legitimacy, authority, and recognizable belonging in a group include advocacy organizations, official media sources, and officials in political and justice systems. These actors determine the agendas with which victimhood is understood and how the public should interpret the nature and severity of trafficking victimization, which can be described as agenda setting. In this way, there is a “currency in the victim label” (Hoyle et al. 2011:326) which is capitalized upon by the majority of anti-trafficking organizations as they elaborate on the insufficient and misused agency of victims who are “waiting for rescue” (“The Exodus Road”).

Agenda setting happens in the discourses created by modern actors about nonactors, significantly guiding what the media and the public find important about a topic (Johnson 2011; Marchionni 2012). For example, political leaders are granted cultural authority and legitimacy and the frameworks they use in speeches and policies are very difficult to change once accepted

by the public and included on anti-trafficking organization websites. A notable example is former president Bush's explanation in 2003 of human trafficking "in a speech to the UN General Assembly as a 'special evil, a multibillion-dollar underground of brutality and lonely fear and global scourge alongside the AIDs epidemic'" (Marchionni 2012:148). This description given by a modern actor about nonactors reinforces agenda setting linking ideas about immigration, crime, and disease, significantly shaping interpretations of and options for victims' actions in the institution of anti-trafficking advocacy.

Ultimately, the monolithic helpless, naïve, sexually exploited victim is a nonactor role constructed through modern actors' interpretations of victim's experiences. Individuals who do not fit this role are not understood as victims by organizations and therefore experience additional difficulty in accessing resources. In other words, a victim is a role defined by the construction of victimhood (through warning sign lists, survivor stories, relational dependency, sensational images, etc.) based on institutionalized "particular packages of commonly occurring structure-agency relationships" (Emirbayer & Mische 1998:1006). Resources are made available to the constructed victim, which is an institutional role or 'package' of a particular structure-agency relationship.

This thesis has described at length the most common constructs of victimhood among anti-trafficking organizations. These constructions, of monolithic nonactor victims, are not supported by empirical literature (Baker 2013; Cojocar 2015; Sabon 2018; Viuhko 2019). The institutionalized nonactor victim script portrayed by anti-trafficking organizations stands in sharp contrast to the intersectionally oppressed, but agentic victim described in the literature (e.g., Cornforth-Camden 2018; Le 2016; Long & Dowdell 2018; Miriam 2005; Struble 2019). The

following section offers an explanation of how and why the nonactor script is reproduced again and again across organizations despite the lack of empirical support from the literature.

*Processes of institutional isomorphic change explain the similarities among organizations*

This thesis has shown that a strong majority of organizations use the same constructions of victimhood despite organizational differences, and with a near absence of empirical data cited on organizations websites this is a curious phenomenon.

The concept of institutional isomorphism helps to explain this recurrence. Institutional isomorphism is a constraining process that causes units in a population to increasingly resemble other units exposed to the same cultural and environmental conditions. This process addresses how “once a set of organizations emerges as a field, a paradox arises: rational actors make their organizations increasingly similar as they try to change them” (DiMaggio & Powell 1983:148). The concept of institutional isomorphism provides additional insight into recurrent patterns observed among anti-trafficking websites, explaining how constructs of victims’ agency as insufficient and misused for self-advocacy described in the results chapters can be understood as “symbolic patterns, social discourses and narratives of different reach” (Abdelnour et al. 2017:1777). These construct a monolithic nonactor victim. What I am referring to as the monolithic victim is a victim construct that exemplifies ‘increasing similarity’ among organizations with diverse backgrounds and locations, which is reproduced and defined by “interorganizational patterns of action and social positions” (Abdelnour et al. 2017:1777). Institutional isomorphic theory explains and predicts how these similarities are created and maintained.

Institutional isomorphism, not to be confused with competitive isomorphism in open market fields, happens through three overlapping processes (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). These

are worthwhile to explain here for how they illuminate monolithic constructions of victimhood. These three processes of institutional isomorphism include coercive, mimetic, and normative changes in organizations. Coercive isomorphic change “stems from political influence and the problem of legitimacy” which pressure organizations to meet cultural expectations of the society in which they exist and comply with normative models followed by other organizations with deeper histories of legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell 1983:150). For anti-trafficking organizations, these pressures notably include moral and political expectations for women’s sexuality, commercial sex, and ideas about rehabilitation programs for victims modeled after drug abuse rehabilitation. For example, most organizations signal a political stance on prostitution and morality, as in

If we want to get serious about combatting trafficking, we must address the demand; most buyers are white, middle class, married men--maybe not who you'd expect. If someone’s willing to buy, there will be someone else willing to exploit and sell vulnerable individuals. We have to address demand! (“Shield NC”).

Political and cultural ideas about family, morality, and prostitution pressure organizations to take a stance on these issues in ways that legitimize their anti-trafficking advocacy goals. In this way, coercive isomorphic change contributes to the similarities among organizations which portray victims as helpless, sexualized others who need to be rescued from “the fastest growing criminal enterprise in the world” (“US Institute Against Human Trafficking”). Moreover, the disproportionate emphasis on sex over labor trafficking among anti-trafficking organizations is influenced by cultural expectation and pressures evident in news coverage, political speeches, and advocacy discourse which “ultimately select certain aspects” of victimhood and “place them in a field of meaning” (Johnston, Friedman, & Sobel 2015:235).

Mimetic isomorphic change encourages imitation as a standard response to uncertainty, such as “when goals are ambiguous, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty”,

because when solutions to a problem are unclear borrowing responses from other organizations “may yield a viable solution with little expense” (DiMaggio & Powell 1983:151). Finding a solution to human trafficking is certainly an ambiguous task with unclear solutions, which also helps to explain how organizations have ended up recycling the ‘reach, rescue, and restore’ solution despite its pragmatic shortcomings. Solutions to human trafficking are ‘ambiguous goals’ in the sense that most organizations commonly used problem statements such as “approximately 600,000-800,000 people are trafficked in the United States annually” (“31:8 Project”) and “Human trafficking is the fastest growing and 3rd largest organized criminal activity... By the time that you read this information, human trafficking may pass arms trade- because you sell drugs or weapons once and they're gone” (“Florida Dream Center”). When faced with such formidable problem statements, organizations look to one another for reassurance on how to combat the ‘special evil’.

Similarly, normative isomorphic change stems primarily from professionalization of organizations where professionalization is “interpreted as the collective struggle of members” to “define the conditions and methods of their work, to ‘control the production of producers’” of legitimate knowledgeable authority (DiMaggio & Powell 1983:152). The professionalization of anti-trafficking organizations is evident in rescue and treatment narratives which portray organizations as the only sources of knowledge and authority about trafficking while victims are described as unaware of their victim status and unable to self-advocate even if they do know they are victims. For example, organizations professionalize their ‘conditions and methods’ for work through statements such as “In the fight against sex trafficking, people – those in the fight full time and volunteers – are the key to releasing the captives, helping them see they have value and worth, helping them go from victim to survivor to thriver” (“Be The Key”). Anti-trafficking

organizations define how anti-trafficking advocacy is done and who gets to do it, which is a ‘professionalization’ suitable for modern actors acting on behalf of nonactors.

The three processes of isomorphic institutional change describe the ways in which anti-trafficking organizations similarly construct a monolithic victim whose agency is insufficient for self-exit, misused for self-recovery, and is ultimately helpless without the services provided by organizations. The formation of the monolithic nonactor victim role stems from “sensationalized accounts developed by relevant stakeholders to craft a ‘sympathetic’ victim in order to garner public and political interest and support for anti-human trafficking efforts” (Jones & Kingshott 2016:5) and institutional isomorphism explains how it has been normalized and modeled among anti-trafficking organizations. Or as DiMaggio and Powell say, “none of this [isomorphic change], however, insures that conformist organizations do what they do more efficiently than do their more deviant peers” (1983:154) it rather indicates that similarities “can more likely be credited to the universality of mimetic processes than to any concrete evidence that the adopted models enhance efficiency” (1983:152).

In sum, this thesis provided an inductive thematic analysis of the ways in which anti-trafficking organizations construct victimhood and victims’ agency, finding that the majority of 264 organizations describe victims’ agency as insufficient for self-exit and misused for self-recovery. Institutional theory explains how these constructions are scripts for nonactor victims for whom organizations, populated with modern actors, set advocacy agendas that explain and are explained through the monolithic stereotype of a human trafficking victim. The discrepancy between the nonactor victim construct reproduced by most organizations and the agentic resilient victim nascently reflected in the literature is explained by the process of institutional isomorphic change. Practically, this indicates that anti-trafficking organizations reproduce



misrepresentations of victims' agency as a result of coercive, mimetic, and normative institutional pressures, and not because they have observed real victims to be as helpless and hopeless as their representations suggest.

### Limitations and Recommendations

While this research provides important insight into the construction of victimhood, victims' agency, and the ubiquity of those constructions, it has a number of limitations. I did not analyze the history and development of each organization to understand its political, religious, or moral motivations for engaging in anti-trafficking work. Nor did I interview representatives from the organization. Instead, I took their representations at "face value", that is based on the text each organization chose to use in presenting itself on the internet. I operated under the assumption that the organization consciously chose specific text and images to communicate their understanding of victimhood and victimization as well as the role their organization sought to play in their antitrafficking work, yet it is possible that websites have not been updated and/or that they no longer reflect the beliefs, views, or commitments of the organizations. Similarly, I have not worked with an anti-trafficking organization for any significant amount of time. That lack of experience could mean that I have misinterpreted the decisions organizations make in deciding how to construct victimhood on their websites. Future studies could address these limitations through conducting interviews with organization staff and through taking a more wholistic approach to analyzing the organization beyond what is included on the website.

A second limitation of this study is that I did not make any attempts to understand public perceptions of human trafficking outside of what is mentioned in the literature and on the websites themselves. In other words, I did not try to understand the public audiences for which anti-trafficking organization websites are written. I may have failed, therefore, to understand

why organizations construct victimhood as they do for their perceptions of public audiences. Similarly, this study did not engage with the deeply troubling and continually referenced conflation of human trafficking with slavery. Including an analysis of the ways in which organizations demonstrate abolitionist ideologies or reference histories of trafficking as ‘white’ or modern-day slavery would add to the findings of this study but would have also made the wholistic analysis of organizations too cumbersome to accomplish the task at hand.

Despite these limitations, policy implications for improving anti-trafficking advocacy are still motivated by this thesis, and my analysis contributes to sociological understandings of victims’ agency. This thesis demonstrates how text and images used to construct victims need to be based on empirical observations of real victim and survivor experiences, not based on media dramatizations or political agendas. As it is, organizations construct victims who are unable to act on their own behalf and the services offered are created for the constructed agentic-less, addicted, battered female victim (Davy 2015; de Vries et al. 2019; Hebert 2016). Organizations should discontinue their use of ‘warning sign’ lists and rescue narratives, instead follow the example of Polaris to understand trafficking victimhood through examining the ‘whole story’. These changes would better represent and serve real victims who do not match the ideal victim type, which would also better meet the goals of organizations which actually want to offer assistance to individuals who have experienced human trafficking victimization. In a sociological sense, these recommendations for organizations demonstrate an application of institutional theory for better understanding the agency and options for action available to human trafficking victims.

Second, this thesis revealed how constructions of victims with insufficient and misused agency are examples of the feminization of human trafficking victimhood. The literature on male

victims of human trafficking explain that victims are assumed to be young heterosexual females (Barnett 2016; Hebert 2016; Richards & Reid 2015) and this thesis has revealed that a rescuable, transformable, and controllable victim is portrayed as a female victim. Images and ‘survivor stories’ reinforce the fetishization of female victims and contribute to a disproportionate focus on sex trafficking over labor, military, and refugee trafficking.

These recommendations for change are described in the spirit of outlining problems in anti-trafficking advocacy that require new forms of organization “coordination that will encourage diversification rather than hastening homogenization” (DiMaggio & Powell 1983:158). And to this end, a third recommendation for organizations and future research is to look for stories of self-exit and intrapersonal resiliency which illuminate the ways in which the construct of a monolithic othered victim commits epistemic violence. This thesis has shown how the rhetoric used by the majority of anti-trafficking organizations regard victims as nonactors, who like polar bears or whales, need modern actors to save and protect them. Victims who have exited and recovered on their own are silenced in this rhetoric and their experiences do not make sense as victims of trafficking in light of constructions which describe victims’ agency as insufficient and misused. Therefore, organizations and future research need to investigate the narrative of the resilient and agentic victim whose experiences test the institutional hypothesis of the nonactor victim.

In sum, the ways in which I have found organizations to construct victims’ agency as insufficient and misused for self-advocacy are best explained through the institutional theory concepts of modern actor and nonactor and through scripts for action. The ‘victim’ is institutionalized as a category of social action in which options for agency are restricted. This helps to explain the ways in which anti-trafficking organizations objectify victims’ attributes and

relationally define them as nonactors. The three arguments I make in this chapter explain why organizations construct victims' agency as insufficient and misused, with the discussion on mimetic isomorphic change providing a particularly important insight on the mirroring behavior of organizations. I find the process of mimetic change to be especially important for explaining the ubiquity of the nonactor victim construct because it lessens implications of blame leveled against organizations for misrepresentations of victimhood. Organizations are certainly still accountable for their choices in representing victimhood, but institutional isomorphism offers a deeper explanation of the pressures and processes which shape organizations in the field of anti-trafficking advocacy and acknowledges the good intentions organizations may have in trying to help victims of human trafficking.

As described in the previous section on recommendations for organizational change, there is a great amount of important work to be done improving anti-trafficking advocacy efforts. This thesis contributes to that effort through empirically identifying the ways in which anti-trafficking organizations construct victimhood and has explained how institutional theory is a useful approach for understanding the effects and similarity of victim constructs. Going forward with the hope that as more survivor epistemologies are included in research and organization leadership, institutional theory could also be used as a way to critically examine changes in scripts assigned to victims in the institutional field of anti-trafficking advocacy. Similarly, as human rights and social justice movements continue to gain their footing in institutional fields of victim advocacy, isomorphic change remains a useful lens for observing change among anti-trafficking organizations.

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## APPENDIX

*Analytic theme one: Codes that describe victims in terms of victim characteristics*

### A) Describing victims' voice and thoughts

Advocacy Discourse

Deserving

Freedom

Hope

Mission Goals

No Voice

Solution Statement

Survivor Stories

Survivor Voice

### B) Describing exploitation

Human Trafficking Definition

Slavery- Modern Day

Varieties of Trafficking

Physical Violence

Victim Experiences

Victimization

Who is Harmed

### C) Describing appearances & needs

Demographics

Age

Race

Signs & Clues

Appearance

At Risk

Personal Change

Sensational Rhetoric

Video Links

Victim Needs

*Analytic theme two: Codes that describe victims relationally by comparison with other actors.*

A) Actors affiliated with anti-trafficking organizations

Metaphors- Darkness

Princess Narrative

Exit Button

Exit Help

Faith Based

Services

Gender/LGBTQ support

Location

State (49 states)

Organization History

Organization Needs

Problem Statements

Rescue Narrative

Treatment Narrative

Victim Choice

B) Interested public actors

Audience

Action Steps

Fragile Audience

Snow Leopard

Fighting Human Trafficking

End Slavery

Prevention

C) Traffickers as actors

How Many in US

Money – Industry

Control

Traffickers