

BEYOND TRAFFICKING AND SLAVERY: OPINION

Who's the 'parasite' in anti-trafficking?

A response letter to our new feature, 'Ten Years On, Have We Moved Beyond Trafficking and Slavery?'

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Ivanka Trump announces grants for human trafficking work in 2020 | *Nicholas Kamm/AFP via Getty Images. All rights reserved.*

I was disappointed to read the introduction to the feature currently coming out on Beyond Trafficking and Slavery – "Ten Years On, Have We Moved Beyond Trafficking and Slavery?" Instead of using the occasion of BTS's 10th anniversary to issue a renewed call to reassert the importance of rigorous critique, its authors committed a wilful act of self-harm under the guise of self-reflection.

They begin by asking “why, from our vantage point, does it seem like the world has made so little progress on moving beyond trafficking and slavery?” This framing not only signals disillusionment, but risks undermining decades of critical scholarship, insulting the publication’s author base, and chilling future work.

Then they frame anti-trafficking’s critics as “killjoys” and place them alongside what they call a “parasite problem”. This legitimises long-standing views of what they frame as the “establishment” – as evidenced in [a recent interview](#) with Nick Grono, CEO of the Freedom Fund – namely that critique of anti-trafficking is reactive, dependent and even parasitic to the work they do.

In doing so, the authors hand the anti-trafficking establishment, particularly its mainstream, neoliberal, carceral wing, which critics argue causes “collateral damage” to the survivors of and those vulnerable to exploitation – exactly what it wants!

The false binary

The authors base their article around a binary framing that positions the anti-trafficking establishment on one side and killjoys on the other. This could be viewed as flattening the complexity of both.

Whilst many of the powerful actors, organisations and institutions that have historically defined the mainstream anti-trafficking agenda still favour depoliticised, technocratic, and institutionally safe surface-level interventions – thereby often avoiding confrontation with the deeper structural causes of exploitation, such as neoliberalism, racial capitalism, border control and corporate power – there are actors (in minority) within the establishment who are critical to it. However, their influence is often circumscribed by the very structures they inhabit.

Opposing them are the killjoys – described as professional critics, framed either as outsiders (mainly academics seeking to dismantle the system) or insiders (those working within organisations to push for reform). This insider vs outsider binary oversimplifies the complex and often contradictory positions critics occupy. Many engage in critical work while navigating establishment structures, depending on their funding or being commissioned by the very actors they critique. It is more useful to view killjoys as a set of practices – sometimes radicals, sometimes reformist, sometimes compromised sell outs – that unsettle the field, even as they are subject to co-option, silencing, and absorption into the very systems they resist.

Who are the anti-trafficking killjoys?

To understand anti-trafficking killjoys, we must see their different origin stories, points of focus, rationales, methods and spaces from which they operate.

The original anti-trafficking killjoys were not academics but sex worker activists, grassroots organisers and trade unionists. For over 30 years, they have highlighted the collateral damage of anti-trafficking work by drawing on their personal experiences, and by bringing grassroots movements and radical traditions like no border politics, radical Black tradition, post-colonialism, intersectional feminism, and Marxism to the forefront of the trafficking debate.

People become killjoys in many ways. Some have lived through the harms of anti-trafficking policies. Others emerged from within the establishment, some turned against it. While some have abandoned the field, others continue to minimally engage with the mainstream anti-trafficking efforts and simultaneously channel their energy towards grassroots movements. Others came to it through intellectual and political awakening by reading, among other things, the articles published on this very site.

Killjoys speak and see things from where they stand. For example, those located in or trained within institutions and critical disciplines (like social science) in the Global North and trying to understand trafficking in the West may view anti-trafficking as a fundamental roadblock to imagining a world free from exploitation, oppression, and rightlessness. Others could view the trafficking paradigm as a pragmatic opportunity for progress in an otherwise hostile landscape – where immigration-phobic and corporate-aligned states need continuous badgering to advance the rights and support to victims and vulnerable people.

Killjoys have played a crucial role in not letting the establishment act with impunity

In contrast, those based at and researching in the Global South may not be as privileged to call out the entire anti-trafficking paradigm, but they experience its damaging effects and understand its flaws. They know the state process to prove trafficking is arduous, and the support offered – even if successful – is often undignified, if not humiliating.

Almost every one of those working with returnee migrants, deported individuals, and trafficking survivors in their countries of origin can see the deep structural violence that persists long after someone is ‘rescued’. Many know that stigma of anti-trafficking remains forever, and makes rehabilitation and reintegration

nearly impossible. Many are angry and frustrated because anti-trafficking not only fails the people, but actively derails local struggles for caste, gender and class justice where they live.

Over the past decade BTS has amplified all these voices and more, creating a much-needed platform to enable the multiplication of killjoys. It gave a safe space to people who saw the imperial, racist, colonial, manipulative, and criminal aspect of anti-trafficking establishment and wanted to raise hell until the situation changed.

The article's reductive caricature of critics' risks delegitimising decades of killjoys who have not only shaped impactful critical scholarship but have unsettled the entire anti-trafficking establishment. Without their interventions during the Vienna negotiations, for instance, the UN's definition of trafficking might have been limited solely to sex work. It will deter the emergence of new critical voices that were historically nurtured by BTS. I appreciate the authors' desire to engage in self-critical reflection, but this is an act of self-sabotage that I cannot support.

The anti-trafficking establishment is parasitic

The authors' attack on their own community reaches its peak when they describe what they call the "parasite problem". They are referring to scholars who have built careers around critiquing anti-trafficking. They suggest that such people may be causing problems for the establishment, but ultimately need the anti-trafficking establishment to survive so their careers can too. I fear this framing of critics can, and will, be read by some as suggesting that critics are intellectually dependent and without solutions.

Many killjoys have challenged and destabilised key aspects of the mainstream anti-trafficking establishment by exposing its contradictions and real intentions. Whilst many actors within the establishment consider all sex workers as victims of trafficking, supply data to immigration-phobic states to detain and deport racialised people, and profit from racist, white supremacist movies, literature and video games that glorify white saviourism, others borrow from QAnon conspiracies and ignore corporate crimes while targeting racialised and gendered bodies. Still others are interested in disciplining rescued people in rehabilitation centres and elevating problematic professionals, academics, nepo-kids and celebrities as heroes. As a result, many killjoys argue that the anti-trafficking establishment largely functions to exculpate the West from the historical harm (and ongoing legacies) of transatlantic slavery and colonialism while shutting down conversations on reparations. Some argue that in some geographies the establishment's focus and priorities effectively exclude

important issues, like caste-based slavery in South Asia, from meaningful discussions.

Many killjoys have called all of this out. Again and again. They have played a crucial role in not letting the establishment act with impunity. Take the sex trafficking debate of the early 2000s, which was marred by voyeuristic representations, the silencing of exploited voices, forced raid-and-rescue operations, and stigmatising victims. Killjoys' relentless critiques forced the anti-trafficking establishment to be careful with repeating the oft-critiqued positions. For example, the mainstream establishment members finally 'remembered' the survivors. Killjoys forced them to turn towards "survivor leadership" – though much of it remains largely tokenistic, and even the most effective ones are not sustainable. Hence, when the authors of the BTS piece ask whether the world has made progress in moving beyond trafficking and slavery, they overlook these substantial contributions made by killjoys.

Instead, the authors lump them together into a binary of 'internal' (reformist) and 'external' (radical) critics, and by presenting both as inherently progressive they obscure the complexity of their positions and roles as well. Many entered academia reacting to mainstream anti-trafficking discourse, many of us were even part of the establishment for a while, and many continue to indirectly work for establishment, particularly through academia.

The establishment continually draws in killjoys from adjacent struggles, luring them into its trap and making them part of them

But the binary framing erases the reality of these self-identified killjoys who, knowingly or otherwise, actively contribute to the expansion of the anti-trafficking establishment. This includes producing knowledge to justify mainstream anti-trafficking carceral responses, shifting the debate into adjacent terrains like climate change and online scamming, and promoting technocratic solutions such as blockchain and satellite surveillance. These moves risk deepening rather than dismantling carceral logics of the mainstream anti-trafficking. Not all killjoys are resisting the system; some are inadvertently helping to sustain and legitimise it.

What establishment, especially one facing sustained critiques, would not invest in those who help patch up its failures with technocratic solutions, especially when this also creates the illusion that the entire establishment (especially its critiqued part) is responsive, "reflexive" and redeemable? It rewards those who identify as killjoys with money, visibility, power and influence (remember the top 100 modern slavery influencer list?). These rewards are rarely about amplifying dissent. Sometimes they function to manage, contain, and at times erase the

radical edge of critique, transforming it into something the establishment can absorb without changing its core logics.

This strategy allows anti-trafficking agendas to parasitically attach themselves to every adjacent social crisis: from climate change and county lines, to online scamming, forced marriage, and child sexual exploitation, all repackaged as a trafficking issue. As a result, the establishment continually draws in killjoys from adjacent struggles, luring them into its trap and making them part of them. This opportunistic expansion secures institutional survival by producing new killjoys who, whether knowingly or not, serve the establishment.

Despite the risk of being co-opted by the establishment, collectively killjoys serve as the essential, anti-parasitic force challenging and unsettling the system. Their interventions cause disruptions which the establishment continually tries to absorb or neutralise for its own survival. And it is through the uncompromising position of some grassroots activists and critical/radical scholars that lead many to believe: the anti-trafficking establishment as a whole – despite the presence of a few ‘good apples’ and ‘insider killjoys’ working for them – must ultimately be dismantled!

Yes, the authors are right that the critique can appear repetitive. But I do not think this is because it has failed. It is because the establishment has become more adept at absorbing critique, mutating around it, and moving in new directions. As the establishment continues to incentivise collaboration with academics who position themselves as killjoys, thereby expanding its reach, it is crucial for killjoys to build solidarities with others whose fields are being encroached upon by the parasitic anti-trafficking agenda.

Killjoys unite

Building solidarity means aligning with other radical movements – prison abolition, autonomous politics, climate justice, racial justice, gender justice, caste justice, etc. – and confronting the anti-trafficking establishment for what it is: part of a broader carceral, capitalist, patriarchal and racist apparatus.

It seems that the anti-trafficking establishment is neither interested in or even not capable of confronting the structural causes of exploitation, oppression and rightlessness. Even though it harbours some killjoys, its fiddling on the surface is a ploy, which distracts attention away from the structural injustices and self-serving agendas hidden down below. They are reluctant to confront structural causes of exploitation as that would require the establishment to turn inward – risking political discomfort or institutional collapse. Hence even though there are

'good apples', overall the establishment is a wolf in sheep's clothing and we must never lose sight of that fact.

BTS must continue to cultivate new killjoys, not only by continuing to create safe spaces for new entrants in this field, but also by forging relationships with those closest to the new issues appearing at the coal face of anti-trafficking. Let them take the lead – whether it's youth crime, environmental destruction/climate change, or online safety, dormitory labour, compound labour etc. – and support them to speak loudly about what they find, be it a repetition of old complaints or something new.

There will be a time when we will no longer need either the anti-trafficking establishment or the killjoys. Until then, killjoys must resist the temptation to serve the establishment designed to distract from the very structures that produce exploitation. The mainstream anti-trafficking establishment can never adequately address the structural causes of conflict, climate change, children's rights, gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, youth struggles, drug policy failures, racial violence, migrant rightlessness, or caste-based inequality. It merely hijacks these struggles to justify its own survival.