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Editorial: Rethinking Anti-Trafficking Funding: Following the money, again

Kiril Sharapov, Suzanne Hoff, Jonathan Mendel, and Borislav Gerasimov

Abstract

This Editorial introduces a special issue of the *Anti-Trafficking Review* that investigates where the funding for anti-trafficking work comes from, goes to, and with what effect. It reflects on some of the changes in funding that have occurred over the past ten years and why it is necessary to research and analyse these changes. It then introduces the articles in the special issue and concludes with suggestions for future research on the topic.

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Following the Money, Again

When we launched the call for papers for a follow-up edition to the 2014 special issue of the *Anti-Trafficking Review*, themed ‘Following the Money: Spending on Anti-Trafficking’, our goal was to understand anti-trafficking money flows by analysing trends in donor financing, identifying the main beneficiaries of anti-trafficking funding and assessing its outcomes. We aimed to increase accountability of both funders and funding recipients and contribute to a more efficient allocation of anti-trafficking resources that genuinely serve the needs of survivors and at-risk groups. By examining who funds anti-trafficking efforts and who receives and benefits from this funding—and who does not—we hoped to contribute to the critical debate, which questions the familiar narratives portraying all anti-trafficking and anti-slavery initiatives as inherently and unconditionally good.

Critiquing anti-trafficking funding in an academic journal published by one of the largest international alliances of anti-trafficking organisations, the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), may seem counterintuitive. Most anti-trafficking NGOs, as well as many other actors, rely on external funding to sustain

their efforts, so they usually call for more resources and support to carry out work that may include identifying and supporting victims, prosecuting criminals, and mitigating risks which make individuals vulnerable to abuse, violence, and exploitation. Yet, beneath these calls lies a challenging reality: a complex web of ideas, actors, and actions. This issue asks how these are funded, for what reasons, by whom, and with what effect on those concerned.

This web extends beyond grassroots organisations to include state institutions, such as immigration authorities, law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, and, increasingly, private for-profit companies operating on behalf of state agencies, all of which play significant roles in anti-trafficking efforts. The influence of these actors can shape anti-trafficking policies and actions in ways that may not always benefit the people they are purported to help. Indeed, not all anti-trafficking initiatives are genuinely beneficial, and some are outright harmful.¹

In planning for this issue and considering the need to scrutinise anti-trafficking funding, we found guidance in Foucault's words: 'The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticise the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticise and attack them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them'.² This guidance suggests that the complex and often obscure interplay between various institutions and the broader anti-trafficking landscape must be scrutinised to interrogate the underlying power dynamics and question the neutrality of these institutions. Using anti-trafficking funding as a lens to both study and look through can be a valuable approach here.

The anti-trafficking industry operates within a complex and opaque funding landscape that lacks transparency and accountability. Not enough is known about how much money is allocated, the specific types of anti-trafficking work being funded, who the funders are, and what is ultimately achieved. Despite—or perhaps because of—this limited knowledge, the anti-trafficking industry has continued to expand.³

Government agencies like the US Department of Justice and supranational bodies such as the European Commission, along with private foundations, contribute to

¹ J Mendel and K Sharapov, 'Expanding Circles of Failure: The Rise of Bad Anti-Trafficking, and What to Do About It', *Global Policy Journal*, 18 November 2021, <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/18/11/2021/expanding-circles-failure-rise-bad-anti-trafficking-and-what-do-about-it>.

² N Chomsky and M Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature*, The New Press, 2006, p. 41.

³ Mendel and Sharapov, 2021.

a fragmented yet substantial and growing pool of resources aimed at combatting human trafficking. For example, the US Department of Justice increased its funding for services for human trafficking victims and survivors from USD 10 million in 2011 to 98 million in 2023.⁴ As of 2024, the US Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (JTIP) has, through its International Programs section, ‘leveraged more than \$300 million in foreign assistance funding’ since 2001 to support over 960 anti-trafficking projects worldwide.⁵ Between 2013 and 2024, the government of the United Kingdom allocated GBP 819 million for anti-trafficking work globally, including within the UK.⁶ The European Commission allocated over EUR 35 million for anti-trafficking projects between 2014 and 2020 and EUR 13 million in 2022 through just two of its funding programmes.⁷ Private foundations also play a significant role, although data on their contributions is less readily available. For example, the Freedom Fund, which describes itself as ‘a catalyst in the global effort to end modern slavery, working in the countries and sectors where it is highly prevalent’,⁸ allocated USD 15.8 million as ‘grants to partners’ in 2022.⁹ This proliferation of funding sources and the lack of centralised oversight contribute to the challenges of measuring the effectiveness of anti-trafficking initiatives—and funding.

Since the ‘re-discovery’ of ‘modern slavery’ in the 1990s, there has been a notable shift in how anti-trafficking activities are funded. Initially, most funding came from government sources. However, over time, private and corporate donors became increasingly involved—a phenomenon known as philanthrocapitalism. Private entities have assumed, as Chuang argues, an ‘outsized role in a variety of social causes’ by drawing on their ability to ‘monopolize the market of ideas through their enormous policymaking and agenda-setting powers’, including their embrace

⁴ Office for Victims of Crime. ‘Grants & Funding’, n.d., retrieved 26 August 2024, <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/human-trafficking/grants-funding>.

⁵ ‘About Us – Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons’, US Department of State, n.d., <https://www.state.gov/about-us-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons>.

⁶ A Bhagat and J Quirk, ‘Modern Slavery Funding Landscape in the United Kingdom (2013–2024)’, Brunel University London. Dataset, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.17633/rd.brunel.25291315.v3>, sum of column D.

⁷ ‘Questions and Answers – Trends, Challenges and Revision of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive’, European Commission, 19 December 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_22_7780. EU member states provide national-level funding as part of their anti-trafficking, law enforcement and victim support actions, or as development aid, but we did not attempt to research these national allocations for this Editorial.

⁸ ‘About’, The Freedom Fund, n.d., <https://www.freedomfund.org/about>.

⁹ ‘Financials’, The Freedom Fund, n.d., <https://www.freedomfund.org/about/financials>.

of modern-day slavery abolitionism.¹⁰ The privatisation of concern for specific human trafficking victims has created a marketplace where philanthrocapitalists and governments supply targeted funding, driven by their own ideas of (un)fairness and (in)equality.¹¹ These funds are often allocated in response to specific types of demand that may not necessarily come from survivors themselves, but from service providers who determine the scale and nature of the assistance and prevention services they are prepared to offer.

In addition, a significant amount of funding, particularly in the US, also comes through religious organisations, churches, and individual donations. This type of funding, which appears to be substantial, operates in problematic and often unaccountable ways, further complicating the landscape of anti-trafficking donors.

In this context, a key question for those funding anti-trafficking efforts should be whether their financial support challenges or perpetuates existing systems of political and economic exploitation. These systems, rooted in expanding global inequality, continually create the conditions that render people vulnerable to exploitation. Simplistic public messaging reinforces the false belief that increased donations alone will solve the issue, perpetuating a cycle where vulnerable populations remain at risk—or are placed at greater risk—while charitable organisations prosper.

Exploring What We Know—and Don't Know—about Anti-Trafficking Funding

We circulated the call for papers for this issue in March 2023, listing a range of potential questions with which contributors could engage. These included assessments of how much funding was available for anti-trafficking work at national or regional levels, or allocated by individual grant-makers, with specific attention paid to the criteria, priorities, and interests embedded in the donors' funding decisions. Several contributions in this issue address this question, including those by Hebert, Rothchild *et al.*, Rossoni, and Sharapov *et al.*

¹⁰ J A Chuang, 'Giving as Governance? Philanthrocapitalism and Modern-Day Slavery Abolitionism', *UCLA L. Rev.*, issue 62, 2015, pp. 1516–1556. See also J Chuang and E Shih (eds.), *Philanthrocapitalism and Anti-Trafficking*, Beyond Trafficking and Slavery/openDemocracy, London, 2021.

¹¹ Many of the states and corporations supporting global anti-trafficking initiatives have chequered human rights and labour practice records, including, for example, Belarus, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. Some would argue that this list should be extended to include countries like the United Kingdom and the United States.

We were also keen to find out how and by whom the funding priorities were decided and whether they responded to the needs of the populations who were supposed to benefit from them. While there is an increased emphasis on engaging people with lived experience and establishing organisations to support this engagement, questions remain about whether the funding truly reaches survivors or if they are once again exploited for others' interest, including financial gain. In this issue, Tamara MC, a survivor of trafficking, highlights the exploitation of survivors' labour in anti-trafficking work, emphasising that all survivors involved in anti-trafficking efforts should be compensated for their work and offered pay rates commensurate with other expert consultants. The contribution by Rothchild *et al.* provides a clear example of how anti-trafficking funding does not always reach those who need it. On the other hand, the contribution by Nichols and Preble describes how anti-trafficking funders can utilise community-driven research on survivors' needs, demographics, and experiences to inform their funding decisions.

We also invited potential contributors to share evaluations of the effectiveness or impact of anti-trafficking funding, given that it runs in the millions of dollars at the level of individual donors and in the hundreds of millions at the national level in some countries. Unfortunately, we received no submissions that focus specifically on the impact of anti-trafficking funding.¹² We are not aware of any systematic and transparent research initiatives that scrutinise the efficiency of anti-trafficking spending at the national level or at the level of a major donor or grant-maker.

Another broad area of interest was the impact of funding priorities on the receiving organisations and, from a broader angle, how funding allocations reinforce specific representations of human trafficking in both policy and practice. In this regard, several contributions in this issue reflect on policy representations, including Sharapov *et al.*, who examine how the UK government allocates anti-trafficking funds to support its strategy of preventing unauthorised migrants from reaching the UK border. Continuing the focus on the UK, Findlay explores how anti-trafficking funding is distributed to profit-making contractors, which harms those it was intended to help and contributes to broader anti-immigrant narratives and practices. Hebert's analysis of US government anti-trafficking funding shows that only a small fraction goes towards addressing the conditions that increase precarity, and it is directed primarily to countries in the Global South. Gupta critiques the ways in which popular representations of trafficking

¹² There remains significant uncertainty about 'what works' in addressing human trafficking more broadly, and 'organizations are still struggling to demonstrate impact and discern what works to combat human trafficking'. K Bryant and T Landman, 'Combatting Human Trafficking since Palermo: What Do We Know about What Works?', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 6, issue 2, 2020, pp. 119–140, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2020.1690097>.

(such as in film and media) impact policy and funding. However, no contributions assessed the impact of cultural and political influences apparent in funding allocations on organisations that compete for and accept funding from sources, including national governments, which may be involved in or profiting from the impoverishment of vulnerable individuals.

Inspired in part by work on police and prison defunding and abolition, there has been increasing discussion of defunding activity in other sectors, particularly when this activity involves the use of ‘legitimate’ force.¹³ The idea of defunding the anti-trafficking industry—and the possibility that defunding other government activity might benefit trafficked people and those at risk of exploitation—is developed in this issue by Sharapov *et al.* and Findlay, who point to the harms of the UK immigration system. Future work on defunding the anti-trafficking industry could similarly explore which other parts of the sector are ineffective or harmful and should be defunded, and how this might achieve more radical structural change.

Scholars and activists discussing defunding are often asked to account for what should be done with the money saved. This question does not necessarily need to be answered prior to defunding: stopping spending money on harmful activities would be worthwhile even if there is no plan for what to do with the money saved. Yet, it remains a relevant question that would benefit from additional work. In this issue, Findlay advocates for shifting funds to community building and ‘decentralised support networks’, while Sharapov *et al.* suggest possibilities ranging from funding a better welfare system to an unconditional basic income.

Alongside this discussion of defunding and critiques of spending in the anti-trafficking sector, we wanted to understand what those within the sector saw as the best use of funds. In informal conversations with anti-trafficking NGOs in Europe about examples of best practices, they highlighted that funds should directly support the assistance, protection, and empowerment of victims as well as judicial measures against exploiters, and address the structural root causes of trafficking and exploitation, all of which, in turn, would help prevent human trafficking. They stressed that compared to funding for think tanks, research, capacity building, and costly conferences and projects without concrete outcomes, very little funding is made available for support services. They also recommended that donors provide direct and flexible support to NGOs instead of channelling funding through intermediaries.

¹³ Mendel and Sharapov, 2021.

This Special Issue

While working on this issue, we encountered several ‘roadblocks’. Some of the disappointments about the state of knowledge about anti-trafficking funding, as raised by the then-guest editor Mike Dottridge in 2014,¹⁴ could easily be echoed in this editorial. For some contributors, identifying the best approach to analysing anti-trafficking spending proved challenging. They had to decide whether to describe how much is being spent and where the money is allocated, considering the lack of public information on anti-trafficking spending. Others grappled with assessing the funding’s overall effectiveness, given the absence of systematic, valid, and reliable evaluations of what funded anti-trafficking activities actually achieve. For some, it was difficult to assess how funding is used to push specific anti-trafficking agendas, and at what level—organisational, national, regional, or international, or through selective funding arrangements. Ironically, we have observed that research on anti-trafficking funding does not tend to be well-funded compared to other areas, which can limit the resources to do this work.

The final selection of articles in the special issue includes five full-length research articles and three short ones, all focusing on the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union. **Joshua Findlay** argues that UK government anti-trafficking funding is mostly used in harmful ways. Based on extensive research into the UK National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and interviews with anti-trafficking practitioners, he demonstrates the clear links between the NRM and other arms of the immigration system, which lead to impoverishment and desperation for victims of trafficking and many migrants and asylum seekers. Findlay concludes by calling for the defunding of the NRM and organising through community building.

In a similar vein, **Kiril Sharapov, Jonathan Mendel, and Kyle Schwartz** argue that defunding government activities that render people more vulnerable to exploitation could significantly contribute to anti-trafficking efforts. Their analysis of UK government anti-trafficking funding from 2011 to 2023 finds that ‘anti-trafficking policy discourses and funding trajectories in the UK are developing and expanding in a fractured way’. Funding largely focuses on individual ‘victims’ and ‘criminals’ within the UK, while funding for projects outside the UK may attempt to address structural issues, but these are largely presented as external to the UK. The authors highlight that the focus on the rights of people ‘at risk’ of trafficking outside the UK has coincided with UK government attacks on the rights of migrants within the country.

¹⁴ M Dottridge, ‘Editorial: How Is the Money to Combat Human Trafficking Spent?’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 3, 2014, pp. 3–14, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121431>.

Laura Hebert's analysis of US government funding (2017–2021) finds that it is largely spent on reactive work, ranging from support for survivors to crime prevention. Similarly to Sharapov *et al.*, she finds that projects targeting the conditions that render people vulnerable to exploitation were relatively underfunded, receiving less than 20 per cent of total US government funding. Furthermore, all these projects were focussed on and framed around perceived problems in the Global South.

Next, **Tatiana Rothchild, Ajela Banks, and Tara Burns** review the anti-trafficking grants distributed by the US Office for Victims of Crime between 2004 and 2023, with a special focus on the state of Alaska. They present this data against the experiences of a young Black trafficking survivor (one of the co-authors) who was refused help by several federally funded organisations in the state. The authors critique government funding requirements that prioritise institutional processes and collaboration with law enforcement but fail to protect or empower survivors.

In the last of the five research articles, **Isotta Rossoni** provides an overview of anti-trafficking funding allocated through several programmes of the European Commission in the 2014–2020 programming period. She describes the types of projects and organisations funded, the countries involved, and the amounts awarded. She also presents the findings of a survey of twenty European organisations working in the anti-trafficking field, which aimed to understand their experience with applying for EU funding. Many organisations expressed frustration with the complex and bureaucratic application process and the heavy administrative requirements. Some also felt that they were refused funding because their organisational understanding and approaches to human trafficking differed from those of the European Commission.

In the short articles section, **Andrea J. Nichols and Kathleen M. Preble** describe how a group of anti-trafficking funders in the US State of Missouri developed a strategic plan to guide their funding decisions based on community-driven research into the characteristics, experiences, and needs of survivors. The authors call for big picture responses that address the root causes of exploitation and for funding organisations that employ anti-oppressive practices in their anti-trafficking work.

The last two articles address the question that we posed in the call for papers: 'What would be the best use of twenty million US dollars for anti-trafficking work?' **Kiran Gupta**, drawing on her experience in fundraising and communications at a US anti-trafficking NGO, proposes to use USD 20 million for narrative change work. She argues that film and media in the US present distorted pictures of human trafficking, which impede successful anti-trafficking actions. Therefore, this money would be used for the creation of thoughtful and nuanced representations of human trafficking, with the active collaboration of survivors.

Tamara MC concludes the issue by highlighting the common problem of survivors working in the field not being adequately compensated for their skills and expertise. A trafficking survivor herself, she argues that the best use of USD 20 million is for organisations that hire survivors as consultants, trainers, or speakers to pay them appropriately.

Conclusion

This special issue contributes to the task of revealing and critiquing the political violence of many broadly accepted institutions and aspects of the anti-trafficking industry. The papers map out key contours of anti-trafficking funding—particularly in the UK and the US—and offer suggestions for more productive uses of this money. The special issue also opens up some important questions for future research. There remains a critical need for more research on anti-trafficking funding in the Global South, where the impact of funding decisions and the role of local and foreign actors seem to be overlooked or insufficiently addressed in the existing research. Likewise, more research is needed into the impact of anti-trafficking funding provided by corporations, religious organisations, and individual donors.

The discussion of the harms caused by anti-trafficking funding and practice raises questions about whether these issues are better addressed through defunding or by changes within the sector, and how these might work in practice. The contributions here offer both critiques of the sector and suggestions for future areas of better spending and practice to research. Additionally, the role of survivors also arises here in novel ways—particularly in terms of how funding can address their needs and the importance of the anti-trafficking sector paying survivors fairly for their work.

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