Sex Workers Rights, Workers Rights, & Human Trafficking:
A Social Media Narrative Analysis
December 2016

Introduction

This report examines social media discussions of sex work, human trafficking, and workers rights between **1st January 2014** and **30th September 2016**, with a specific focus on the volume and sentiment of social media content over time as well as audience interests and demographics. Our analysis presents several important implications for stakeholders and advocates seeking to develop communications strategy around these issues.

In recent years, as the anti-trafficking movement has galvanized, there has often been a failure to acknowledge the voices and perspectives of sex workers and other communities in vulnerable situations. This oversight has presented far reaching implications not only for sex workers and their experiences with the criminal justice system, but also for how engaged audiences discuss these issues online. Preliminary research conducted by Fenton Communications, which examined discussions of sex work and human trafficking on Twitter, found that two competing narratives currently shape online discussions of sex work and human trafficking — a pro-sex work or decriminalization narrative, which advocates for the decriminalization of sex work and the recognition of sex workers rights, and an opposing criminalization of sex work narrative, which generally centers discussion on the trafficking of women and children. In order to effectively build a strategy that fights for the dignity and rights of all workers, advocates and other stakeholders must adopt a holistic approach that recognizes the pressing need to address human trafficking without undermining the efforts and rights of sex workers.

In this report, we provide guidance and advice to advocates seeking to better understand discussions of human trafficking, sex workers rights, and workers rights in general. It begins with an overview of key findings and concludes with guidance and recommendations for audience engagement and online outreach.

About The Opportunity Agenda

The Opportunity Agenda was founded in 2006 with the mission of building the national will to expand opportunity in America. Focused on moving hearts, minds, and policy over time, the organization works with social justice groups, leaders, and movements to advance solutions that expand opportunity for everyone. Through active partnerships, The Opportunity Agenda synthesizes and translates research on barriers to opportunity and corresponding solutions, uses communications and media to understand and influence public opinion, and identifies and advocates for policies that improve people's lives. To learn more about The Opportunity Agenda, go to our website at www.opportunityagenda.org

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Methodology

Analysis of social media data was conducted using Crimson Hexagon, a leading social media analytics software that provides access to publicly available social media data including, but not limited to, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, blogs, forums/popular message boards such as Reddit, mainstream news article comments, reviews, and YouTube comments. Crimson Hexagon enables users to create monitors[1] for any topic or set of phrases and establish customized timeframes for data analysis. Once a monitor is established, Crimson Hexagon's algorithm, created by Harvard University professor Gary King, categorizes relevant social media data—identifying content volume trends, patterns in conversation, demographics, sentiment shift over time, and audience segment interests/affinities. Interests and affinities are generated by analyzing the social media habits of audiences partaking in particular online discussions (i.e., what brands, topics, or media sources this audience segment tends to share) to generate a list of interests, which can then be compared to other audience segments. Crimson Hexagon's demographics are calculated using a probabilistic approach that incorporates census data with publicly available data.

To gain a more holistic understanding of narratives concerning human trafficking, sex work, and workers rights online, we created two separate buzz monitors.[2] The first monitor examined online discussions of both human trafficking and sex workers rights in order to identify how these two issues currently intersect and which narratives tend to dominate. This dual issue monitor included the phrases "sex work," "sex workers rights," "trafficking," "human trafficking," "end trafficking," and a number of other related

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[1] A saved search or query is referred to as a monitor.
[2] A "buzz monitor" is one of the three monitor options Crimson Hexagon offers. A buzz monitor allows users to examine online conversations across social media platforms and also enables users to track and gauge the volume of a conversation over time (Crimson Hexagon, 2016).

terms. The second monitor examined online discussions of workers rights independently of discussions of human trafficking and sex work. This monitor included phrases such as "workers rights," "rights of workers," and "workers rights movement."

The two-year timeframe enabled us to examine longitudinal data and identify more long-term patterns in the data. In the overall data population (which consisted of 13,832,463 posts) the majority of analyzed data originated from Twitter, with a total of 9,273,500 Twitter posts; 194,151 posts came from Facebook, and a total of 2,574,052 posts originated from popular blogs, news comment sections, and Google Plus comments. Sampled social media posts are accompanied by a Klout Score, which is a number between 1 and 100 that represents how influential the person sharing the content is. The more influential a person (in terms of share of audience and reach), the higher the Klout Score.

Key Findings

- Discussions of sex work and, to a lesser extent, human trafficking have shifted since 2014. There are clear signs that the sex workers rights movement has gained some ground among key online audiences. Although social media discussions concerning sex work and human trafficking are still dominated by references to "sex trafficking" and narratives that tend to conflate sex work with human trafficking and child abuse, trends indicate that narratives centered on sex workers rights (as a separate topic removed from discussions of human trafficking) are becoming more widespread online.

- A number of the top influencers on Twitter[3] are advocates of sex workers rights, again suggesting that the pro–sex workers rights narrative is gaining traction among social media audiences. At the same time, much of the content shared by the most influential anti–human trafficking advocates makes reference to "sex trafficking" and "prostitution," a finding that suggests more outreach and messaging is needed specifically targeting this population of advocates.

- Amnesty International's pro–sex workers rights declaration resulted in a significant spike in discussions concerning sex work and human trafficking, demonstrating the important role some NGOs are playing in shaping narratives concerning sex work and human trafficking. Amnesty's August 2015 intervention may provide an important model for other organizations or advocates seeking to shift the narrative on sex work and human trafficking.

- There is significant overlap between the focus and interest of online audiences discussing workers rights and audiences engaging in discussions related to human trafficking and sex workers rights. Analysis of online discussions of workers rights, disaggregated from discussion of human trafficking or sex work, reveals that audiences for workers rights are already incorporating many of the core values/goals of anti-trafficking and sex workers rights' advocates—specifically, an emphasis on human rights and gender equality. This finding suggests there is an important opening for advocates seeking to foster cross-issue support and engagement among key audiences.

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[3] Specifically, among audiences who engage in Twitter discussions related to human trafficking and sex work.

Narrative Trends and Shifts

Human Trafficking and Sex Workers Rights: Volume and Engagement

Between January 2014 and September 2016, more than 13 million tweets, Facebook and Tumblr posts, and blog comments on websites like *The Atlantic* and *BuzzFeed* have been written about sex work, human trafficking, and related issues. On average, roughly 60,000 social media posts involving sex work and human trafficking were posted monthly in the United States in the period we studied (*Figure 1*). In the past two years, there have been three dramatic spikes in the level of engagement in online discussions of sex work and human trafficking, with the first taking place in March 2015, the second in August 2015, and the most recent in February 2016.

The March 2015 spike was the result of online reactions to an anti–human trafficking bill put forth by Senate Republicans. Democrats and other commentators argued that the bill included anti-abortion language that would expand the Hyde Amendment, a decades-old prohibition restricting taxpayer money from funding abortion. The bill eventually passed on a 99-0 vote after language related to abortions was amended.
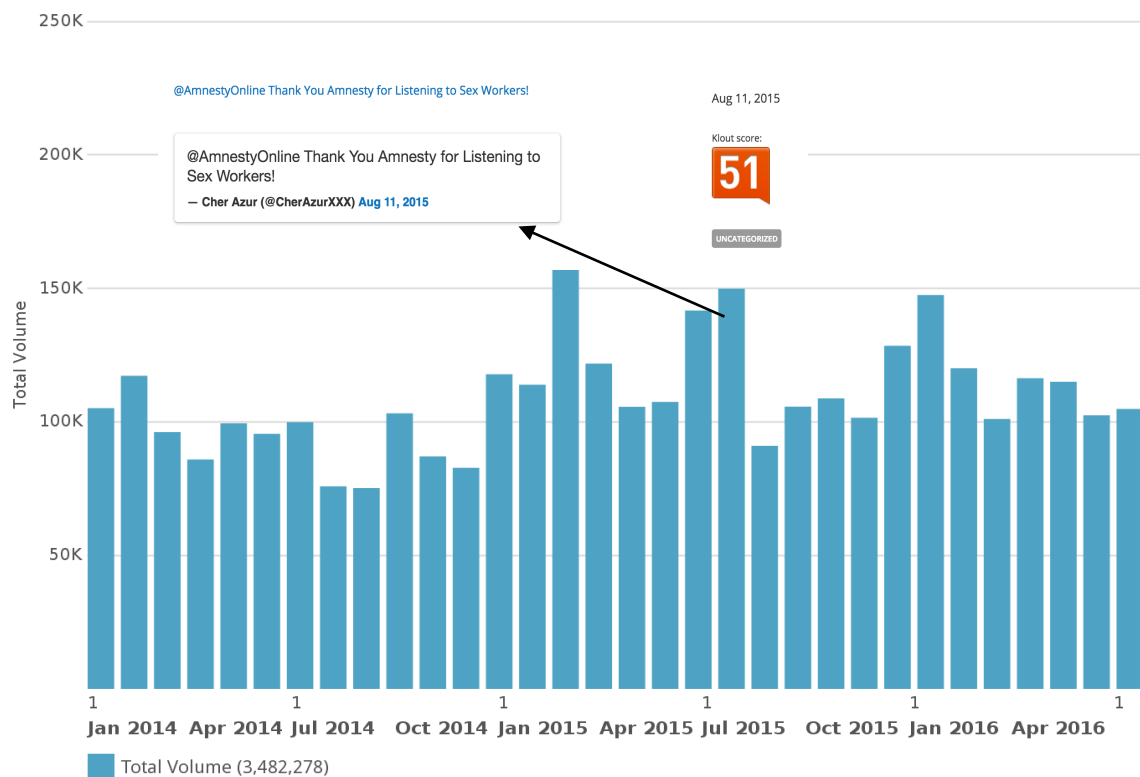

Figure 1: Volume Trends: Sex Work & Human Trafficking Monitor: January 2014–Sept 2016

The second spike, in August 2015, appears to be directly related to Amnesty International's formal declaration that the organization will move toward a position that protects the human and labor rights of sex workers globally and supports the decriminalization of consensual sex work.[4] The final spike in February 2016 seems to be related to news stories surrounding the Super Bowl and concerns about whether there is an increase in people seeking the services of sex workers around the time of this event. These three spikes in interest in human trafficking and sex work represent the current narrative conflict taking place online—specifically, the tension between the goals of anti–human trafficking advocates and advocates seeking to protect the rights of sex workers, alongside the tendency of the mainstream media to focus on sensational stories concerning sex work.

Narrative Trends

Within the same two-year time span, a significant portion of social media discussions related to sex work and human trafficking focused on "sex trafficking," a phrase that appeared in roughly 24 percent of sampled social media posts (on Twitter, Facebook, and blog comment posts).[5] References to "sex trafficking" generally emerged in the context of referencing victims and survivors of human trafficking, news stories about the trafficking of women and children, and discussions of "sex trafficking" in relation to pornography and "prostitution" (as seen in *Figure 2*). A much smaller number of posts focused on countering the conflation of human trafficking with sex work.

Figure 2: Social Media Sample: "Sex Trafficking": January 2014–Sept 2016

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[4] Amnesty International, August 2015, https://www.amnesty.org/en/policy-on-state-obligations-to-respect-protect-and-fulfil-the-human-rights-of-sex-workers/

[5] Based on a random sample of 10,000 posts.

Although references to "sex trafficking" are still prominent in overall discussions of both sex work and human trafficking, analysis of trends over the past two years suggests that a pro–sex work narrative is gaining ground. The percentage of posts including references to "sex worker" and "sex work" increased from 17 percent in January 2014 to 19 percent in September 2015 (*Figure 3*). As of 2016, references to "sex workers" and "sex work" appear in 19 percent of sampled social media posts. Somewhat surprisingly, "end trafficking" was only featured in 2 percent of posts between 2014 and 2016, suggesting that the popularity of this phrase is very recent.

Online discussions of "sex work" have been largely centered on legitimizing sex work as a form of paid labor and advocating for sex workers rights. Other discussions have focused on uplifting the connection between sex workers rights and women's rights. Social media data also indicate that references to "trans rights" and "black sex workers" are becoming a more prominent part of narratives concerning sex work and sex workers rights, which appears to be a result of advocates calling for a more intersectional approach in sex workers rights activism.
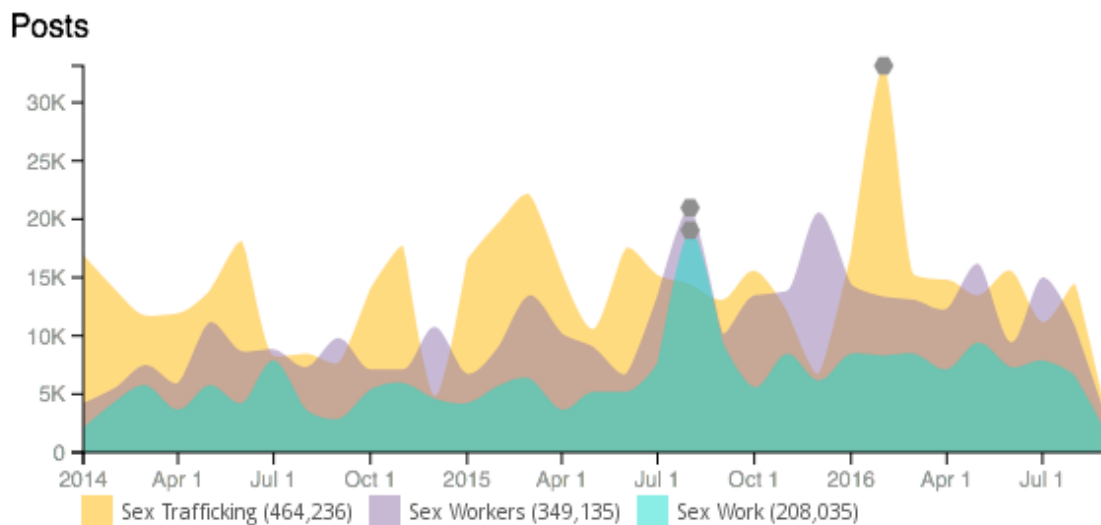

Figure 3: Social Media Topic Trends: January 2014–Sept 2016

Workers Rights

To provide a broader understanding of narratives concerning the rights of workers and identify potential openings for cross-issue support, our analysis of social media data also included an examination of online discussions of workers rights disaggregated from talk of human trafficking and sex workers rights. Between January 2014 and September 2016, 127,003 posts were made referencing workers rights, indicating that online discussions of workers rights occupy a much smaller audience segment than the other two topics. Nonetheless, when narratives around workers rights are examined independently, a promising trend emerges.

In the timeframe examined, online discussions of workers rights generally emerged in relation to five prominent themes: human rights, women's rights, protecting workers rights, sex workers rights, and the fight for workers rights (*Figure 4*). These core themes share many of the advocacy focuses and goals of both anti–human trafficking advocates and sex workers rights advocates, suggesting there is already fertile ground for cross-issue messaging and activism.
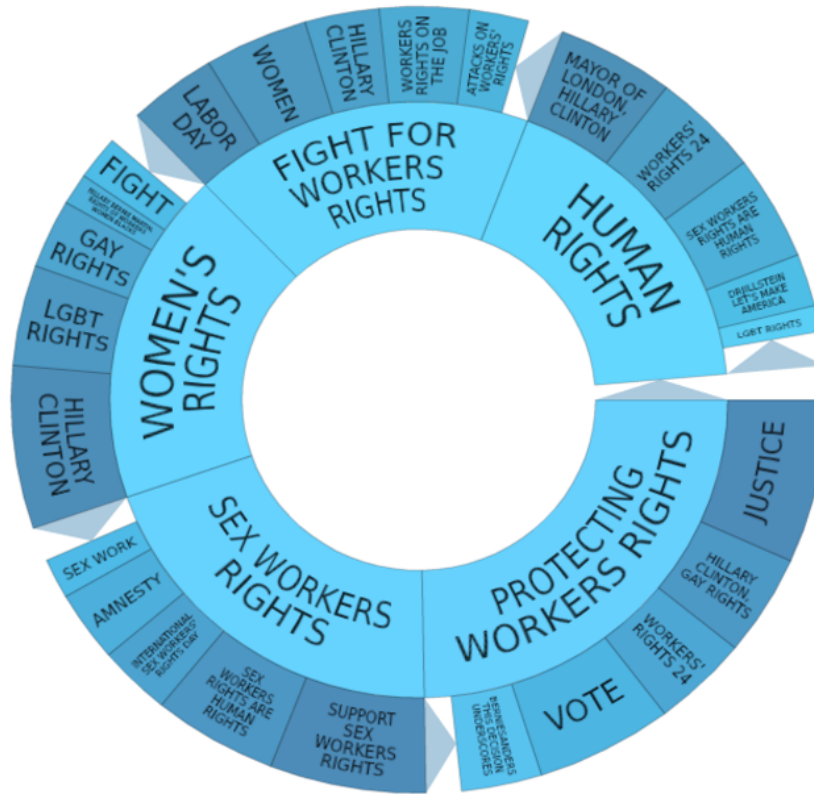
Figure 4: Workers Rights Topic Wheel: January 2014–September 2016

A less promising trend was observed when Twitter data were examined independently of other content sources. Users can engage in conversations and content sharing on Twitter in multiple ways; for instance, it is possible to respond to another user by replying directly to their tweet or by including a mention of a particular user in a tweet. A Twitter mention is a tweet that contains another user's @username anywhere in the body of the tweet. Examination of the top mentions in January 2016 and September 2016 revealed that mentions of Donald Trump—specifically "@realDonaldTrump"—have become a prominent part of discussions related to human trafficking and sex work. As shown in *Figure 5*, social media data indicate that comments made by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump connecting immigration with drug and human trafficking appear to have gained traction among online commentators.

Figure 5: Example Tweet_@realDonaldTrump

Key Influencers and Audience Demographics

Top Twitter Influencers: Human Trafficking and Sex Workers Rights

The following section provides an overview of the key Twitter influencers driving some of the online discussions around human trafficking, sex workers rights, and workers rights more broadly. Top influencers on Twitter are the most active authors in a conversation over a particular time period, regardless of their influence (Klout) score. Influence on Twitter is determined by an authors' volume of retweets related to a given topic (*Tables 1* and 2).

Top Influencers (Twitter Handle)	Volume of Retweets/Mentions	Focus/Key Phrase Association
@youtube	3,200+	YouTube mentions are generally associated with the sharing of videos in a Tweet. The most common term associations accompanying a @youtube mention include: "Sex Trafficking" "Child Trafficking" "Prostitution"
@endtraffick	3,000+	The End Trafficking project is a UNICEF initiative to raise awareness about child trafficking. Common phrase associations include: "human trafficking" "end child trafficking" "petition"
@melissagira	1,500+	Freelance journalist and author advocating for the decriminalization of sex work. Common phrase associations include: "sex worker" "amnesty" "sex workers rights"

@amnesty	1,000+	Amnesty International is committed to ending human trafficking while also supporting human and labor rights of sex workers. Common phrase associations include: "sex workers" "sex work" "human rights" "decriminalization of sex work"
@JeromeElam	760+	Columnist for Communities Digital News and a survivor of human trafficking and sexual abuse as a child. Writes and speaks out against human trafficking, particularly the trafficking of children. Common phrase associations include: "sex trafficking" "child sex trafficking"
@NickKristof	680+	*New York Times* columnist and advocate for the end of human trafficking. Common phrase associations include: "sex work" "sex trafficking" "sex trafficking victims"
@mistressmatisse	680+	Mistress Matisse, a writer and dominatrix in Seattle and advocate for sex workers rights. Common phrase associations include: "sex workers" "sex work" "myths about sex trafficking"

Table 1: Profile of Top Influencers on Twitter: Human Trafficking & Sex Workers Rights

Top Influencers	Volume of Retweets/Mentions	Focus/Key Phrase Association
@wordpress	1,900 +	WordPress's popularity among audiences engaging in discussions around workers rights appears to be driven by the popularity of a particular WordPress blog run by Rick Cooley, who describes himself as Progressive, antiwar, humanitarian, and an environmentalist. He currently has more than 70K Twitter followers. Common phrase associations include: "@rcooley123" "workers rights cooley" "workers rights" "Unions"
@SadiqKhan	1,800+	References to Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, emerged in the context of people sharing a popular tweet from Hillary Clinton praising Khan for his humble beginnings as a son of Pakistani immigrants and his commitment to workers and human rights. The most common term associations accompanying @SadiqKhan include: "champion of workers rights" "workers rights"

@HillaryClinton	1,100+	Workers rights audiences frequently mentioned or tweeted @HillaryClinton in relation to her support of workers rights. Several influential labor groups and unions such as the AFI-CIO endorsed Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. Common phrase associations include: "AFL-CIO" "workers rights"
@BernieSanders	850+	Bernie Sanders is popular among audiences engaging in discussions around workers rights and was mentioned frequently online in relation to his pro-union and workers rights stance. Common phrase associations include: "unions" "women's rights" "protect workers rights"
@AFLCIO	570+	The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization is one of the largest national trade unions in the United States. Common phrase associations include: "unions" "labor unions"

Table 2: Profile of Top Influencers on Twitter: Workers Rights

Engaged Audience Demographics and Interests

Audience Demographics

Using Crimson's demographic feature, we examined the gender, age, and race of audiences engaging in discussions about human trafficking, sex work, and workers rights. Analysis reveals that audience demographics across these three issues are fairly aligned; however, audiences engaging in sex workers rights discussions are more likely to be white, whereas the demographics of workers rights audiences also skew whiter and older.

For those engaging in discussions centered on human trafficking, roughly 54 percent are women, whereas 46 percent are men. Roughly 71 percent of individuals discussing human trafficking online are age 35 or older. About a third of human trafficking audiences are white, 31 percent Asian, 25 percent Black, and roughly 10 percent Latinx. This compares to a gender breakdown of 60 percent women and 40 percent men among audiences discussing sex work; 66 percent are age 35 or older. Seventeen percent of sex workers rights audiences are Asian, 16 percent Black, 4 percent Latinx, and just over 6 in 10 (61 percent) are white.

Workers rights audiences tend to be older and are more likely than human trafficking and sex workers audiences to be white. Roughly 90 percent of people engaging in online discussions concerning workers rights are older than age 35 years. Just more than 70 percent of people engaging in online discussions concerning workers rights are white, roughly 14 percent are Black, 8 percent Asian, and 6 percent Latinx.

Sub-Interests & Affinities

Another feature of Crimson Hexagon is the affinities tool, which allows users to examine the interests of audiences engaging in particular online discussions and compare the interests between different key audiences (*Table 3* and *Figure 6*). Comparison of audiences engaging in discussions related to sex work and human trafficking reveals that the interests and content sources between these two key audiences differ significantly. Interest segmentation between the two audiences suggests a large segment of the audience engaging in discussions of human trafficking is conservative-leaning and religious.

Human trafficking audiences are 11 times more likely than sex worker audiences to have an interest in the Polaris Project, a non-profit based in Washington, DC that advocates for the end of human trafficking and also appears to support the complete ban of sex work. Human trafficking audiences are also nine times more likely to have an interest in church and seven times more likely to have an interest in Christianity. However, sex worker audiences are three times more likely than human trafficking audiences to have an interest in sex education and are twice as likely to have an interest in feminism, science and technology, and social justice.

Common Interests	Interests Distinct to Human Trafficking Audiences	Interests Distinct to Sex Work and Sex Workers Rights Audiences	Interests Distinct to Workers Rights Audiences
Affordable Care Act	Polaris Project	Sex Education	Labor Unions
MSNBC	Church	Feminism	Progressive Politics
Charities	Christianity	LGBT	Law

Advocacy	Benghazi	Activism	Politico
Social Change	Theology	Science and Technology	Political Campaigns
United Nations	ESPN	Writing	Blogging
Human Rights	Conservative Politics	Social Justice	Climate Change

Table 3: Audience Interest: Human Trafficking and Sex Workers Rights

Figure 6: Audience Interests

Recommendations

These findings present several important implications for messaging and audience engagement around human trafficking, sex work, and workers rights.

➤ **Lead with values**: Anti–human trafficking, sex workers rights, and workers rights advocates may not share the same list of policy demands, but they can and should paint an affirmative picture of the society they are trying to create. One formula for building an effective message is **Value, Problem, Solution, Action**. Using this structure, we can lead with the shared values that are at stake, outline why the problem we are spotlighting is a threat to those values, point toward a solution, and ask our audience to take a concrete action.

Core values to uplift that touch on all three issues include:

Self-Determination: Our inherent right to determine our own wants and needs and make decisions for ourselves.
Human Rights: The guarantee of dignity and fairness we all deserve by virtue of our humanity and which governments around the world have recognized as universally essential.
Dignity: Our right to be treated with honor, respect, decency, and regard for our rights.
Voice: The ability to have a say in the decisions that affect us, in voting booths, at public forums, and across the media.

➤ **Use shared interests to build cross-issue engagement and amplify the intersections**: Although the racial, gender, and age demographics between audiences advocating for sex workers rights and those engaged in discussions related to human trafficking greatly align, there are major ideological differences. But there is fertile ground to foster cross-issue support.

Advocates seeking to develop communications that support both the elimination of human trafficking and the decriminalization of sex work can start conversations by highlighting common interests, such as social change, human rights, the United Nations, and charity work, and pointing to solutions that align with these interests.

Among sex workers rights and workers rights audiences, advocates seeking to leverage this potential should make use of their shared interest in human rights and justice.

It appears crucial for advocates to continue to push for an intersectional discussion of sex workers rights, with a central focus on the intersection of sex workers rights, racial justice, immigrant rights, and workers rights. An intersectional approach is of critical importance for advocates seeking to expand the audience primed to be interested in sex workers rights and to counter the argument that sex workers rights is an issue only of concern to white audiences.

➤ **Prioritize the voices of less represented groups:** In addition to pushing for an intersectional approach, advocates should uplift and amplify the voices of engaged audiences who are already partaking in cross-issue discussions but who remain less represented within the movement. For instance, our analysis reveals that a subset of sex workers rights audiences are already focused on "trans rights" and "black sex workers." In addition, the audiences for all three movements are predominantly white, but both sex workers rights and anti-trafficking audiences comprise a significant portion of people of color. These audiences should be prioritized for outreach and online engagement.

➤ **Promote popular hashtags:** The #endtraffick hashtag has grown in popularity in recent months, due in large part to the efforts of Amnesty International, UNICEF, and other anti-trafficking organizations. Leveraging this existing popularity could help those seeking to reach new online audiences already engaged in the discussions concerning human trafficking, while also promoting a narrative that does not undermine the efforts of sex workers rights advocates. Advocates should also be strategic in their use of hashtags, making use of popular anti-trafficking hashtags to talk about and engage sex workers rights issues and audiences.

➤ **Popularize commonsense policy solutions:** It is important to highlight solutions to issues about which audiences are concerned and not only point out problems. Audiences can quickly lose hope and interest if they're not sure fixes are available. By both promoting appropriate and effective policy solutions and providing examples of success, advocates can more easily move audiences beyond rhetoric to action.

➤ **Engage influencers who are open to cross-issue discussions:** Our examination of key online influencers on Twitter revealed that some overlap already exists in the people driving online discussions of all three issues. For instance, Amnesty International is prominent in both online discussions of human trafficking and sex work, while freelance journalist and author Melissa Gira Grant is a key influencer in both online discussion of sex workers rights and workers rights more broadly. These key influencers and their audiences should be prioritized for engagement, outreach, and cross-issue coalition building.

➤ **Be precise and careful with language choices:** A central issue facing sex workers rights advocates is the conflation of sex work with the trafficking of women and children. In order for sex workers rights activists to counter this conflation, and for anti-trafficking advocates to not unintentionally undermine the efforts of sex worker activists, **advocates should avoid the use of the term "sex trafficking" in communications**, unless specifically referencing relevant criminal code sections.