"Victims, Villains, and Valiant Rescuers: Unpacking Socio-Legal Constructions of Human Trafficking and Crimmigration in Popular Culture"

Abstract
The “war against human trafficking” has been a frequent topic in American news broadcasts, movies, social media, and television programs. Hollywood actors have joined forces with musicians, NGO advocates, and sympathetic allies to raise awareness about trafficking and rescue victims from “sexual slavery.” Almost always, such statements have sought further mobilization of criminal justice institutions to protect victims and punish the criminals who exploit them.

This paper analyzes the socio-legal construction of subjects in the pop culture narrative of human trafficking – victims, villains, and valiant rescuers. I assess how advocacy strategies and framing techniques deployed by anti-trafficking organizations are repackaged and represented in depictions of human trafficking in popular media. I pay particular attention to the dual role of law in these portrayals as an instrument for vindicating victims and policing the risk posed by trafficking at home and abroad.

Such media portrayals of human trafficking reflect “crimmigration,” or the convergence of criminal and immigration law, and exemplify the operation of “governing through crime” politics and “carceral feminism” in American anti-trafficking efforts. The socio-legal construction of trafficking subjects in American popular culture reveals the important role of framing processes in shaping public awareness of – and political support for – anti-trafficking campaigns. Further, the framing of trafficking as a crimmigration problem helps explain why legal responses to “modern day slavery” are both stimulated and constrained by popular attention to the issue.