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Narrating Human Trafficking: Advocacy Strategies in the Face of Apathy, Invisibility, and Indifference

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

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Research Panel: Framing Rights: Narratives and Advocacy

Presenter: Kelli Lyon Johnson, Miami University Hamilton

Title: Narrating Human Trafficking: Advocacy Strategies in the Face of Apathy, Invisibility, and Indifference

Abstract:

The inclusion of personal stories about victims and survivors has been a common advocacy strategy in the struggle to end human trafficking. This paper examines the reasons for the prevalence of personal narratives in anti-trafficking advocacy and provides an analytical framework for understanding the three most common narrative strategies used these advocacy discourses.

One typical reason given for the inclusion of such stories centers on the explicit attempt to elicit empathy — an effort to personalize or humanize the human rights violation across social, geographical, and identity gaps for an audience theoretically empowered to contribute to change through their own advocacy, their donations to the cause, or the development of political will. The role empathy plays and its potential limitations continue to be the subject of much debate for academics and practitioners alike.

Another frequent justification for using personal stories rests on the concept in human rights law and advocacy of recognition, which, in narratives about trafficking and in survivors' stories, again focuses on individuals as a means of naming the human rights abuse and securing remedy.

A final explanation for the use of personal narratives in anti-trafficking campaigns and policy work hinges on morality — that it's the right thing to do for other human beings, a kind of amalgam of the empathy and recognition approaches.

Through the lens of these three approaches — empathy, recognition, and morality — I suggest best practices for the use of survivor stories in human rights work generally.

About the presenter:

Kelli Lyon Johnson is associate professor of English and an affiliate in justice and community studies at Miami University-Hamilton, where she teaches classes on human trafficking, nonprofit studies, multiethnic literature, and writing. Her recent publications include articles and book chapters on trafficked children, trafficking narratives, and the problem of human trafficking in the for-profit corrections environment. She is currently working on a book manuscript about trafficked girls as objects of international relations.