

A common idea in the anti-trafficking field is ‘rescue’.

Let’s talk about it.

What is rescue & where does this idea come from?

Most stories about human trafficking present a simple picture: good people saving a helpless victim from a bad guy. These stories often involve police or concerned citizens, raids or sting operations, and typically portray women or children being physically rescued from their captors.

Popular media, such as the 2008 blockbuster *Taken* and the recent film *Sound of Freedom*, create the perception that rescue is dramatic, effective, and the go-to response to combat human trafficking.

It’s understandable that people want to help others, but survivors and other anti-trafficking experts want you to know that [these dramatic portrayals aren’t accurate](#) and that sensational rescue stories can actually make it harder to help victims.

Rethinking Rescue

“What could possibly be bad about rescue?” “So, should we just leave people in bad situations?”

It’s not about leaving people behind; it’s about how we can better serve victims and survivors.

Sensationalized rescue stories cause problems:

- › They often rely on stereotypes, creating a false impression that victims look and behave in specific ways. This can make it harder for victims and survivors to recognize their experiences as exploitation or trafficking and cause them to avoid seeking support.
- › They often offer a one-size-fits-all solution that does not provide diverse care based on people’s different needs—for example, Indigenous survivors might need different support than temporary foreign workers who are experiencing exploitation.
- › Often, ‘rescued’ victims are given time-limited resources or must meet specific eligibility requirements to participate in a program. This can leave people in a more unstable or vulnerable situation when the ‘rescue’ efforts leave them without ongoing support. GAATW Canada has also heard from survivors that they are sometimes not referred to any support services at all, or are simply deported.
- › Rescue stories feel urgent and helpful, but they bypass deeper issues—such as poverty—that put people at risk of exploitation in the first place. Immediate services are important, but if we don’t address underlying vulnerabilities at the same time, the risk remains and people continue to be harmed over and over again

The Bigger Picture: *A Whole-System Approach*

What might be more effective over time in helping victims and survivors of human trafficking?

Rescue is often associated with police. However, for many marginalized groups, such as racialized people or those with precarious immigration status, police involvement can feel unsafe or create additional risks.

Community organizations can provide immediate support because they often have established trust and relationships, and can offer trauma-informed, culturally responsive support.

In addition, survivors have stated that long-term support is “essential to prevent re-trafficking and ensure sustainable recovery” and should consider ongoing safety, stability, and well-being, as well as financial security, access to justice, safe housing, and educational opportunities.¹

Every survivor’s story is different, and their needs may be different, too. It’s vital to listen to them, and give the support they say they need—whatever that looks like.

To enable this kind of sustained, deep support, there must be changes to the systems that allow exploitation to flourish in our communities.

This means louder public support for things like affordable housing and essential items, funding for public services, and labour protections for all workers—not only responding with ‘rescue.’



There’s a better way.

There is a better way to address human trafficking, and it starts by confronting the reasons exploitation happens, not just the end result.

[Learn More Here >](#)

Footnotes

- 1 Global Forum for Human Trafficking Survivors Report. (2026). *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*. https://collectivethreads.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/SurvivorForum_Report_Final.pdf (pp. 7, 12-13, 39).