

July 21, 2015

Timothy E. Smith  
Senior Producer, MSNBC Documentaries  
MSNBC TV  
One MSNBC Plaza  
Secaucus, N.J. 07094

Santoki Productions  
665 Third Street, Suite 501  
San Francisco, CA 94107

Dear Mr. Smith,

We are writing to request that production of *Sex Slaves* cease, and the episodes be removed from MSNBC and all other outlets. Last year, we reached out to MSNBC about a similarly problematic show, *Slave Hunter*, which was subsequently pulled from the air. Thus we are surprised and dismayed that MSNBC continues to air programming that exploits those in the sex trade, including possible trafficking victims, and misleads the public on the issue of human trafficking. Programs like these harm the individuals portrayed and hinder long-term anti-trafficking and human rights goals.

Human trafficking is a very serious human rights issue that affects a number of industries and individuals around the globe. Human trafficking is not equivalent to sex work, but involves the violation of an individual's basic rights and personal freedom through coercion into any form of labor. Its root causes include poverty, racism, imperialism, economic injustice, gender inequality, political strife, familial abuse, and mental illness. By spreading misinformation on this serious human rights issue and presenting it in a sensationalistic, exploitative manner, *Sex Slaves* will only hinder progress for effective and thoughtful anti-trafficking work.

The reasons why someone may engage in sex work can include choice, circumstance, and coercion. A dearth of economic opportunity, marginalization, and the inability to access basic resources can contribute to a person's involvement in the sex trade. Especially for youth, the lack of resources such as safe housing, living wage employment, and education can create situations where engaging in sex work is one of few options. This show addresses none of these factors and instead promotes stigma, shame, and ignorance around sex work and human trafficking, turning a complicated and nuanced reality into public spectacle.

*Sex Slaves* confuses the public by conflating the issues of trafficking and sex work while billing itself as a documentary series raising awareness of human trafficking. However, previews for upcoming episodes primarily feature women, often partially clothed, crying and in various stages of fear and panic as they are arrested for prostitution. In these previews, it is unclear whether the women being arrested are victims of human trafficking or sex workers engaged voluntarily. In addition, the show defines only minors as victims of trafficking, when adults can also be victims of trafficking if they are coerced or forced into the sex industry. The show showcases violent arrests as the solution to all of it, despite the fact that organizations like ours know that hyper-criminalization of the sex trade is not a best practice in

anti-trafficking efforts; it leads to more police abuse, violence, and health risks for sex workers and survivors.

MSNBC and Santoki Productions are likely exploiting their subjects, as it is unclear if they have consented to be filmed in these traumatic moments. Revealing the faces and legal names of those arrested for prostitution will only make it harder for those individuals to seek alternative employment or to leave a coercive situation. Showing these women being arrested for prostitution on national television may also alienate them from their family and support system. The dehumanization in these clips promotes stigma and discrimination against all people in the sex trade, which only makes it more difficult for those who seek other options to meet their economic needs.

MSNBC must stop making a profit off the abuse and trauma of others. In addition to ceasing production of *Sex Slaves* and removing the episodes from MSNBC and all other outlets, we also request a meeting with MSNBC executives to voice our concerns and have a productive dialogue about the coverage of human trafficking and sex work on this network.

Sincerely,

Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center  
New York Anti-Trafficking Network  
Freedom Network, National  
FB Consulting  
Helping Individual Prostitutes Survive (HIPS)  
MISSEY, Inc.  
Project SAFE  
Abeni  
KlaasKids Foundation  
Advocating Opportunity  
Women's Law Center of Maryland  
STEPS to End Family Violence  
Sex Workers Outreach Project – New York City  
Sex Workers Outreach Project – San Antonio  
Sex Workers Outreach Project – Las Vegas  
Sex Workers Outreach Project – Tampa Bay  
Sex Workers Outreach Project – Seattle  
New Jersey Red Umbrella Alliance