

Deb Finan
Vice President, Production & Programming
MSNBC

December 9, 2013

Dear Ms. Finan,

Below signatories are advocates for survivors of human trafficking and sex workers. We are writing to request a meeting about your troubling series, "Slave Hunter: Freeing Victims of Human Trafficking," and to insist on counter programming that accurately reflects the reality of sex work and trafficked people in America. While we respect your efforts to tackle a difficult and necessary subject, the tactics of Mr. Cohen and "Abolish Slavery" mislead the public and threaten the rights and safety of sex workers and survivors of human trafficking.

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. Surreptitiously filmed "interventions" in the lives of possible trafficking victims are ineffective and potentially dangerous. For example, in the preview for the program, Mr. Cohen poses as a client to make a date with a sex worker he believes to be trafficked, encourages her to leave an abusive relationship and gives her a ride to her mother's house. This intervention failed to identify why this person originally left her home, why she encountered and stayed with the alleged abuser, and failed to follow a safety plan or provide adequate support that would allow her to avoid future abuse. Because of Mr. Cohen's failings, he may have escalated the danger. In addition, any exposure of your subjects as women potentially involved in illegal and stigmatized activities puts them at risk for violence, isolation from support systems, and arrest.

In his book, *Slave Hunter: One Man's Global Quest to Free Victims of Human Trafficking*, Mr. Cohen admits that "I get close to the women I meet on the job. This might mean that they end up sitting on my lap or hanging on my neck while we're talking in a karaoke bar. Some of them have even stayed overnight in my hotel room – which definitely goes against official rules. I have cuddled and even kissed a few of these women." We fear that this series, like his book, reinforces an image of sex workers and human trafficking victims as powerless and requiring the help of a vigilante male rescuer whose motives are not questioned. Mr. Cohen is unassociated with any local trusted service provider or law enforcement official, unaccountable to any code of ethics. This series could encourage copycat initiatives, undertaken by individuals with no background or training, who are possibly well-meaning, or possibly have unexamined desires to interact with vulnerable women.

Human trafficking is not a simple problem to be solved in a reality television show; its root causes include poverty, racism, imperialism, economic injustice, gender inequality, political strife, familial abuse, and mental illness. The corner stone of anti-trafficking services must be respect for survivors' human rights and self-determination. Effective services must include:

- A safe environment staffed by professionals who emphasize self-determination
- Confidentiality and client privacy to protect clients safety and from media publicity
- Long-term culturally-competent and linguistically-appropriate case management services
- Medical, mental health, educational, employment, language and rehabilitation services
- Comprehensive legal assistance to give clients access to immigration relief, criminal justice advocacy, and civil claims
- Opportunities for survivor leadership in anti-trafficking efforts

Considering the lack of these effective services, the dubious tactics of Mr. Cohen, the lack of distinction between sex work and trafficking, the inappropriate contact that Mr. Cohen engages in with sex workers, and the danger in which Mr. Cohen potentially puts sex workers and survivors, we find this program unacceptable. We, the undersigned organizations, respectfully request a meeting to discuss this troubling content and how it can be replaced by a responsible and informed look at human trafficking.

Sincerely,

New York Anti-Trafficking Network

Washington Anti-Trafficking Response Network

International Rescue Committee

FB Consulting

Sex Workers Outreach Project-Denver

Women’s Law Center of Maryland

Sex Workers Outreach Project-New York

Sex Workers Outreach Project-Chicago

Best Practices Policy Project

Freedom Network USA

Worker Justice Center of New York

Tapestri, Inc.

Walter Leitner International Human Rights Clinic

**International Institute of Buffalo
The Coalition to Abolish Slavery & Trafficking**

Sex Worker Outreach Project-Las Vegas

Asian Pacific Islander Legal Outreach

Sex Worker Outreach Project - Bay Area

Americans for Immigrant Justice

Sex Workers Outreach Project-USA

Get EQUALNV

The PROS Network (Providers Offering Resources to Sex Workers)

New York Harm Reduction Educators

Gay and Lesbian Community Center of Southern Nevada

Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center