Women in the United States have long battled against patriarchal systems, both religious and political. From Suffrage to the Sexual Revolution, we have worked together demand our rights and rail against injustices. Yet even when we are victorious, the religious ideologies of political leaders often present obstacles that slow our progress.

Human trafficking is generally considered a women’s issue, as women make up a significant portion of victims. Women’s collective record of standing up to patriarchal institutions provides us the capacity and the motive for joining this fight. Human trafficking policies, while providing much needed funding, often place restrictions on how the money can be used. These restrictions are generally based on religious ideologies about women’s sexuality and include clauses denying assistance to victims based on religious ideals. These policies do not take into account the values and beliefs of the cultures involved, nor do they provide a rubric for determining who can receive assistance, leaving the decision to the organizations.

Organizations who receive government support are overwhelmingly faith-based, so they are able to impose their beliefs into the programs. Raid and rescue missions by these programs have not only failed to rescue victims but also re-victimized them in many cases. By allowing faith-based organizations to control much of the effort towards human trafficking, the US is undermining rights of people who are not free. Mostly women and children, they are often abused and sold as any other type of property would be, only in the shadows.

Since the Seneca Falls Convention in 1948, the fight for women’s rights has been grueling yet rewarding. Women are slowly but surely climbing towards equality, winning the battle one step at a time. There has been a great deal of progress from gaining the women’s right to vote in 1920, the Civil Rights Act of 1968 and since. Women increasingly hold positions of power in government and the corporate world, yet pay is still unequal. For everything that’s been accomplished, there is more to be done.

Women have played huge roles in the civil rights and the gay rights movements, recognizing that every person should have equal rights, regardless of their label. Human Trafficking is an issue that overwhelming affects women and children, whose lives are not their own. They are marginalized and invisible, part of the shadow economy. Just as women have been standing up for our rights and the rights of others for more than a century, it is time that we stand up for victims of trafficking as well.

In standing up for victims, we are standing up for equality and human rights. Allowing victims to be degraded or ignored based on personal, religious beliefs is shameful and does nothing to combat the problem. Even in religious contexts, women have been demanding and receiving equal opportunities to serve. Given the success of the women’s movements in general, as well as religious women’s movements, collectively we can and should demand equal rights for human trafficking victims.