

A STATEMENT FROM AMBASSADOR JOHN R. MILLER

Language is as important in fighting modern-day slavery, also known as human trafficking, as it was in fighting historic slavery.

In earlier centuries to avoid facing up to the suffering of slaves, words such as “houseboy,” “field hand,” and “servant” were used. Today, words such as “forced laborer,” “sex worker,” “child soldier,” and “child sex worker” are commonly used.

These words require scrutiny. Laborers forced to work on a plantation, or in a factory, may be “forced laborers” but they are also victims of slavery. Children kidnapped and forced to be killing machines may be “child soldiers” but they are also victims of slavery. At least there is some legal foundation for the previous words, although, they verbally anesthetize the abuse to the victim of slavery.

The most egregious use of language, however, is “sex worker” and “child sex worker.” People called “sex workers” did not choose prostitution the way most of us choose work occupations as pointed out by President Bush’s Directive issued four years ago. After all, who would freely choose an “occupation” in which the death rate from murder and disease is scores of times the norm? Clinical research shows vast majorities of people in prostitution are subject to trauma, violence, rape and 89 percent want to escape. These 89 percent are victims of slavery. As for “child sex workers,” under international laws as well as the laws of almost every nation, children are not old enough to consent to or choose prostitution. And children, many not even teenagers, by some estimates, make up almost 50 percent of those in prostitution in the world.

Of course one can rationalize words such as “sex worker” and “child sex worker” in an effort to avoid a demeaning label such as “prostitute”; however, there are other substitutes such as “women used in prostitution” or “sexually exploited children” that are neither pejorative nor pretend that violence to women and children is “work”!

What is occurring is the use of language to justify modern-day slavery, to dignify the perpetrators and the industries who enslave. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and citizens who care about fighting human trafficking and want to break the cycle of stigmatization and victimization should not use words such as “sex worker” or “child sex worker.” For these reasons, I am directing the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons to encourage grantees and contractors to avoid use of the terms “sex worker” and “child sex worker” and I am advising all U.S. agencies issuing anti-trafficking in person contracts and grants to do the same. To abolish modern-day slavery we must not be afraid to call slavery by its real, despicable name.



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