



Using Sacred Language to Help Those Exploited by Sex Trafficking: Language Matters

The well-known Scriptural passage, John 8:1-11 - sometimes subtitled, “The Woman Caught in Adultery” - is actually a biblical account of sex trafficking. What makes this an instance of sex trafficking? The accusers, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, brought this woman before Jesus to use her for their own personal gain, in this case, to trap Jesus (a rival) and attain a basis for discrediting him publicly.

After they brought this woman to Jesus, Jesus stoops and writes something in the sand. The scripture gives no indication what he wrote, but one by one, those who brought this woman to Jesus wielding instruments of punishment, from the oldest to the youngest, scatter leaving the woman face-to-face with compassion and grace. Whatever the words were that Jesus wrote in the sand, these are the kinds of words, sacred words, that need to be adopted in conversations, communications, and research about sex trafficking.

Social justice advocates of faith must find ways to infuse the language of social justice with sacred words, phrases, and concepts that evoke empathic and compassionate actions on behalf of women and children who find themselves exploited by sexual predators – while at the same time, ensuring that perpetrators are brought to justice. The speaking of such sacred words must

be uttered in governmental decision-making venues, corporate boardrooms, non-profit organizations, churches, theaters and more.

Language Matters

Popular movies and television shows often depict pimps as flashy dressers driving large, fancy cars and the women that work for them as consensually and voluntarily engaged in the business of prostitution without complaint. This portrayal is mere fiction. The truth is that pimps *traffic* young women (and sometimes men) completely against their will by force or threat of force; this is sex trafficking¹. In August 2009, the Interfaith Children's Movement report concluded that the sexual exploitation of children has become the third largest moneymaker for organized crime.² As well it should, sex trafficking of women and children has become a cause célèbre attracting both international and domestic attention of social justice advocates, including activists in the Christian faith community.

Progress in helping the victims of this atrocity is difficult to track in part because of how we talk about this issue. For example, labeling a child a “prostitute” who had sex in exchange for money makes her a criminal rather than the victim that she is. She was prostituted, that is, sexually exploited. Calling a boy a “juvenile delinquent” for performing sexual acts solicited by a wealthy perpetrator leads to him being locked up rather than placed in a nurturing home. There are also varying implications as to how a woman is treated when she is called an “escort” versus a “sex-worker.” The escort is often seen as a profession chosen for economic gain, while a sex-worker/prostitute is viewed as a criminal usually trying to support a drug habit³.

Harness the Power of Language

Language matters. How we talk about sex trafficking dictates whether victims are treated with compassion or are punished. Change is needed regarding how we talk about sexual exploitation. One way to do this is to couch conversations about sex-trafficked persons in sacred language (language of dignity and respect). Another way is to use (positively) provocative advocacy images on billboards or in ads. And a third way is to be intentional about using body language and other non-verbal communication that are kind and compassionate. It is important to harness the power of language in all forms to bring about this change.

In addition, we must know what this power is. Power means to have authority and influence. It means to have command and control. The language we use when we talk about sex trafficking must acknowledge all of these elements. Most importantly, the language we use in every sphere of influence must promote a sense of safety and of well-being for those at risk for becoming sexually exploited.

¹ Walker-Rodriguez, A. & Hill, R. (2011). “Human Sex Trafficking.” http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/law-enforcement-bulletin/march_2011/human_sex_trafficking. Accessed 6/25/2013.

² Interfaith Children's Movement. “Child Exploitation and Trafficking in Georgia.” <http://www.interfaithchildrensmovement.org/>. Accessed 6/25/2013.

³ Farley, M. (2004). “Bad for the body, bad for the heart”: Prostitution harms women even if legalized or decriminalized. *Violence Against Women* 10, 1087-1125.

What Is Sacred Language?

For those in the Christian community, sacred language is used to invoke the presence of God into a situation, circumstance, or incident. In non-religious terms, sacred means deserving utmost respect or honor. In this context, sacred language by extension is the use of words, concepts, gestures, and other non-verbal expressions so that whatever is being referenced is treated with respect and even honor.

A New Lexicon for Social Justice Advocates

This new vocabulary must propel social justice advocates and activists to radical reform in prevention, intervention, and post-intervention. Although federal laws are in place to protect the rights of survivors of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)⁴, the language we use about these issues must further influence legislators who pass trafficking laws as well as the people who enforce these laws to bring perpetrators to justice and those that develop services to meet the reentry needs of those rescued from trafficking. Further, the rescued must at all times be allowed to use sacred language spoken in their own voices to aid in their healing – and they should not be further victimized by a legal system requiring them to testify against perpetrators in order to access the resources they need to seek wholeness. In these and other ways, the use of sacred language is a powerful and much-needed tool in the fight against human trafficking.

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⁴ Victims' Rights and Restitution Act (Selected Excerpts) 42 U.S.C. § 10607. Services to Crime Victims http://www.justice.gov/usao/briefing_room/vw/services.html Accessed 9/21/2013