

# A Preface to the “Chart of Preferred Terminology for Sex Trafficking and Prostitution”

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The authors of a curriculum for supporting trauma survivors provide the following insight into the significance of terminology: “Words are powerful. They define the limits or boundaries around ideas, beliefs, and interactions. The way you talk about something becomes the way you think about it, just as the way you identify someone becomes the way you think about that person” (Day, Vermilyea, Wilkerson, & Giller, 2006, p. 17). In the aftermath of the Jerry Sandusky child sexual abuse investigation at Penn State, *Salon* writer Mary Elizabeth Williams, illustrated this concept in her powerful plea to journalists to learn the difference between the terms *abuse* and *sex*. Williams (2012) wrote, “When you’re dealing with a story that involves rape or harassment or abuse or molestation or child porn or anything that fall under the rubric of criminal behavior, you should call those things rape and harassment and abuse and molestation and child pornography. You know what you shouldn’t call them? Sexy sexy sex scandals, that’s what.” As Williams rightly observed, improper use of the term “sex scandal” in media reporting serves to sensationalize violence and rape, and as her remarks alluded, it masks the reality of crime, abuse, and victimization.

Only a quick survey of the social and political landscape makes it abundantly clear that the words we use to discuss issues matter. For instance, in 2010 radio commentator Dr. Laura Schlessinger announced she was leaving talk radio after receiving a barrage of criticism for a conversation with a caller about race relations in which she articulated the N-word 11 times (Standora, 2010). More recently, Rep. Todd Akin of Missouri incensed many and jeopardized his senatorial political aspirations with his use of the phrase “legitimate rape” (Saletan, 2012). While these well known incidents are somewhat exceptional for their malapropos choice of words, in the public square there is an almost daily battle over terms. *Global warming*, *climate change*, *creation care*, *pro-choice*, *pro-life*, *reproductive rights*, *redistribution*, *homophobia*, *handicap*, and *disability* are but a few of the terms that carry great political, philosophical, and even theological freight into our public discourse.

The issue of sex trafficking and its cognate prostitution do not stand outside this lexicographical melee. In their case, most of the

conflict revolves around the question of whether or not selling sex is a job, or whether there is something innately exploitive about the sale of sex (Miriam, 2005; Jenness, 1990). If one subscribes to the view that selling sex is indeed a legitimate form of work then he or she will likely use a term such as “sex work” (Jenness, 1990). If, however, one believes that the commodification of sex is dehumanizing then he or she will likely utilize phrases such as “prostituted persons.”

My purpose here is not to rehearse the debate between these two perspectives, but to provide context for the “Chart of Preferred Terminology for Sex Trafficking and Prostitution” that follows. As a proponent of the Abolitionist view that prostitution is innately harmful, the chart suggests terms that I believe describe both the harm and dehumanization of commercial sex, but which attempt to preserve the dignity of those caught up in it. I believe that the recommended terms also square completely with an orthodox Christian worldview—repudiating the sale of sex as outside of God’s design for human sexual relations while embracing the *Imago Dei* in us all.

Additionally, the chart is not exhaustive. Since first developing it in 2006, I have realized there are euphemisms and maxims in common use that also mask the harms of prostitution and/or serve to normalize them, one of which I will address here. All too often articles on the subject of prostitution contain the cringe worthy cliché about prostitution being “the world’s oldest profession.” In response to one such article, I shared the following critique with members of the Initiative Against Sexual Trafficking email listserv:

. . . the phrase about prostitution being “the world’s oldest profession” is more than cliché; it is a slur against women. This tired and worn out phrase trivializes the exploitation inherent in prostitution, makes the veiled suggestion that if women have always been prostituting why worry about it, and further insinuates that women have always been “whores.” . . . While millions of women and girls around the world do engage in prostitution for their livelihoods, the majority prostitute out of the will to survive and the lack of viable employment options. To call such desperate attempts at

survival a “job” or a “profession” is to call eating out of a garbage dumpster a gourmet meal (Thompson, 2012).

Trauma experts have explained how labeling is hurtful: “Reducing the essence of a person’s identity to a label is dehumanizing and alienating. No one word or role can encompass our true identity, but a word can easily eclipse our true identity” (Day, et al., 2006, p. 19). Thus it is hoped that the Chart of Preferred Terminology will aid the anti-trafficking and Christian social work communities by encouraging the use words and phrases that illuminate reality while respecting the individuals we serve.

An important note in closing; the Chart of Preferred Terminology frequently utilizes the words *women* and *children* and uses pronouns in the feminine form. Use of female-oriented words and pronouns should not be misconstrued to suggest that only females experience commercial sexual exploitation, and use of the term *children* should be understood to encompass *both* boys and girls. Tragically boys and men are also ensnared and exploited in the various manifestations of the commercial sex trade; this is a terrible fact that all advocates would do well to acknowledge and address. Even so, the use of feminine terms has been maintained because as Bullough and Bullough (1987) explain:

The most obvious generalization that can be made is that in all societies and periods that have been examined, institutionalized prostitution has been aimed at a male clientele and the overwhelming majority of prostitutes have been women. Though male prostitutes have existed in many societies, they have primarily served other males whose sexual preference was males or who turned to fellow males in special circumstances where there was a lack of contact with women. Only occasionally has the male prostitute who serviced a female clientele been mentioned in literature; to document the existence of such individuals on any scale has been impossible (pp. 291-292).

Therefore, given that the institution of prostitution overwhelmingly exists for men and that females make up the majority of those sold for sex, the use of words connoting the female gender has been maintained so as to not obscure the patriarchal foundation on which the sex trade rests.

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# Chart of Preferred Terminology for Sex Trafficking and Prostitution

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<i>Terms Not to Use &amp; Why</i>	<i>Terms to Use &amp; Why</i>
<p><b>Sex work, sex workers, commercial sex work, commercial sex workers, adult services provider, adult sex provider, transactional sex:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These terms have been in use for the last thirty-plus years. The term originated in the early 1970's from a mix of libertarian activists and sex industry profiteers (Leidholdt).</li> <li>• Carol Leigh (also known as "Scarlet the Harlot") a prostituting woman and pornographer claims to have coined the term "sex worker" (Leigh).</li> <li>• The term "sex work" and its derivatives have but one purpose –to normalize prostitution, cast it as an occupation like any other, one that any woman can choose as freely as she may choose to become a teacher, lawyer, or doctor. Sadly, the pro-prostitution movement has succeeded in getting this terminology popularized in the vernacular of popular culture, public health, social service, and even anti-trafficking sectors. This change has occurred without difficulty since the one truth in their rationale is that the term "prostitute" contributes to and exacerbates the stigma, discrimination and violence experienced by persons in the prostitution industry.</li> <li>• "Given conditions of extreme poverty for women, pro-sex-work advocates claim that women choose prostitution to survive, and that recognition of this choice as a form of labor is essential to the goal of securing health and safety standards for women in an industry that otherwise remains unregulated and unprotected, leaving sex workers particularly vulnerable to such 'work hazards' as violent assaults, rape, and sexually transmitted diseases" (Miriam, 4).</li> <li>• "Applied to prostitution, then, the stigmatization of prostitutes – rather</li> </ul>	<p><b>Prostituted persons, prostituted women (or children), women (or children) in prostitution; prostituting; sex industry survivors:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those who view prostitution as a form of violence and as inherently exploitative advocate for the adoption of terms such as those above. While accurately conveying the activity that is occurring (i.e. prostitution), the terms neither label the person involved with a pejorative term, nor normalize prostitution as just another form of work. They are indicative of prostitution as an experience, not a state of being. These terms help express the idea that persons in the sex industry are caught up in the exploitive system of the prostitution industry.</li> <li>• "... abolitionists conceptualize prostitution as an institution fundamentally based on men's sex right, that is, men's entitlement to demand sexual access to women" (Miriam, 11).</li> <li>• "The 'sex work' model of agency obstructs the reality that it is men's demand that makes prostitution intelligible and legitimate as a means of survival for women in the first place" (Miriam, 9).</li> <li>• The "sex work" model obscures and normalizes the physical, psychological, and spiritual harms of prostitution by treating them as "on the job" hazards.</li> <li>• Children used in prostitution should never be referred to as "child prostitutes." Children cannot give legitimate consent to commercial sex acts; therefore, any use of a child for commercial sex—irrespective of supposed consent—is a form of child sexual abuse. The appropriate alternative phrase is "prostituted child" which accurately conveys that prostitution is an abuse which happens to the child, and that the child is not "a prostitute."</li> </ul>

## Chart of Preferred Terminology for Sex Trafficking and Prostitution

<p>than the structure of the practice itself – becomes the basic injustice to be redressed by pro-sex-work advocates who now construe prostitutes as ‘sexual minorities’” (Miriam, 7).</p>	
<p><b>Sex sector, state sex economy:</b></p> <p>“The State facilitates and regulates on behalf of the client and operates as a facilitator / pimp in ensuring the supply is continued under the guise of protecting the rights and health and safety of the victims. The State profits from the industry. Legal and illegal collusion of State and State officials continues. The State cannot be ‘neutral’ in this matter. If it legalizes and regulates prostitution, it promotes prostitution and protects the consumer not the victims” (O’Conner and Healy, 5).</p> <p>The word “sector” can be used to mean part of or a division of a national economy. When used as “sex sector,” the sexual exploitation inherent in organized sexual exploitation is obscured and absorbed into mainstream economic interests of the state.</p>	<p><b>Organized sexual exploitation, prostitution industry, commercial sex industry:</b></p> <p>The phrase “organized sexual exploitation” is a good substitute for referencing sex in terms of economy. It more accurately conveys what the “sex sector” is – a massive organized system for the exploitation and commercialization and profiteering from sex.</p> <p>Additionally, the phrase “prostitution industry” is useful, since it names the sex industry for what it is: prostitution in assorted formats – whether pornographic material (recorded prostitution), virtual prostitution (web-based prostitution), or indoor and outdoor prostitution venues.</p>
<p><b>Forced prostitution, voluntary prostitution, forced trafficking, voluntary trafficking, migrant sex workers:</b></p> <p>“Pro-sex-work” advocates press for the distinction between “free or voluntary” and “forced” prostitution.” They conflate sexual trafficking and labor trafficking on the premise that sex is a form of work (i.e. “sex work”). From this perspective, only cases of “forced prostitution” are considered sexual trafficking, and women who “choose” to engage in prostitution, it is said, should be allowed to “migrate for purposes of sex work” or to engage in “voluntary prostitution” or “voluntary trafficking.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These terms overlook the dehumanization of persons inherent to prostitution.</li> <li>• They shift the burden of proof from the traffickers to their victims. All a trafficker need do is to produce a consent form signed by the victim, and he’s off the hook.</li> <li>• They contribute to false and restrictive interpretation of trafficking victims as</li> </ul>	<p><b>Prostituted Persons, Commercial sexual exploitation:</b></p> <p>The result of splitting prostitution into so-called forced and voluntary prostitution is the creation of two classes of prostitution: A) bad prostitution (i.e. forced) and B) good (or less bad) prostitution (i.e. voluntary). Members of Class A are viewed as deserving of aid and assistance since they are considered “innocent” and as having no culpability in their exploitation. Class B persons however, are often viewed as “sex workers”—individuals exercising sexual autonomy.</p> <p>These assessments are often made with little to no knowledge about how an individual came into prostitution, with no consideration of prostitution as a system of exploitation, or of prostitution resulting from a lack of choices as opposed to a variety of viable options.</p> <p>“The argument that women choose to be in prostitution is not an acceptable way to dismiss the harm of prostitution. We do not dismiss rape and battery by saying that</p>

## Chart of Preferred Terminology for Sex Trafficking and Prostitution

<p>being only those persons who have suffered such things as kidnapping, brutal beatings, being held at gunpoint, being chained to a bed or locked up in hidden rooms. However, traffickers routinely use subtler forms of coercion. Professionals in the fields of torture, domestic violence, child sexual abuse, and commercial sexual exploitation know that torturers, abusers, pimps and traffickers use these coercive methods to groom and reduce their victims “to the condition of slavery.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “One cannot have the right to violation. One only has the right to be free from violation” (O’Conner &amp; Healy, p. 12).</li> <li>• In their pithy paraphrase of feminist author, Kathleen Berry, O’Connor and Healy (2006, p. 12) explain that, “Consent is not a good divining rod as to the existence of oppression, and consent to violation is a fact of oppression. Oppression cannot effectively be gauged according to the degree of “consent,” since even in slavery there was some consent, if consent is defined as inability to see, or feel entitled to, any alternative. If, for example, consent was the criterion for determining whether or not slavery is a violation of human dignity and rights, slavery would not have been recognized as a violation because an important element of slavery is the acceptance of their condition by many slaves.”</li> <li>• “There is a virtual dictionary of lies that conceal the harm of prostitution: voluntary prostitution, words that imply that she consented when in fact, almost always, she had no other survival options than prostitution. The redundancy of the term forced trafficking insinuates its opposite — that somewhere there are women who volunteer to be trafficked into prostitution” (Farley, xvii).</li> </ul>	<p>women choose to walk down the street alone at night. Or, if a woman chose to get married, we do not dismiss battery that occurs within the marriage by saying she chose to be with him” (Stark and Hodgson, 27).</p> <p>The “forced-voluntary” split is false dichotomy maintained by:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) those unaware of harms of prostitution and the techniques used to recruit people for prostitution;</li> <li>2) proponents of the sex industry, from sex industry moguls, pimps and national governments, motivated by the desire for profit;</li> <li>3) consumers of commercial sex who must rationalize their behavior;</li> <li>4) human rights advocates and pseudo-feminists who assert that women have a right to prostitute and that women gain power and agency in doing so; and</li> <li>5) Persons who are more concerned about the culpability of each woman in prostitution than with the systems of inequality and injustice that thrust the majority of women into this lowest caste of society.</li> </ol> <p>The veneer of choice embedded in term “voluntary prostitution” enables society to blame the women, label them as whores, and look the other way.</p>
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<p><b>Client, customer, hobbyist, john, punter, trick, date, curb crawler:</b></p> <p>These words are frequently used to describe the male buyers of commercial sex acts. However, use of these terms normalize their role in commercial sex—as if buying sex is as normal and legitimate an activity as buying a car or dining at a restaurant—and obfuscate their true identity as abusers and perpetrators.</p>	<p><b>Prostitute, purchaser, purchaser of commercial sex acts, commercial sex buyer, perpetrator:</b></p> <p>These terms do not mask or normalize the nature of the male role in the purchase of commercial sex acts.</p>
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The “Chart of Preferred Terminology for Sex Trafficking and Prostitution” originally appeared in the curriculum *Hands that Heal: International Curriculum to Train Caregivers of Trafficking Survivors* published by the Faith Alliance Against Slavery and Trafficking (FAAST) in 2007. A revised version of the chart, including an introductory preface, was published in 2012 in the journal of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW), *Social Work & Christianity*. The version of the chart printed here has not been modified from its 2012 presentation in *Social Work & Christianity*; the preface was revised in 2013. The documents are reprinted with the permission of FAAST and the NACSW. For those seeking the original sources they are as follows:

Thompson, L. (2007). Introduction to the global issue of human trafficking, In B. Grant & C. Hudlin (Eds). *Hands that heal: International curriculum to train caregivers of trafficking survivors*, Academic Edition, pp. 36-40, by the Faith Alliance Against Slavery and Trafficking.

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