



Using “modern slavery” is not recommended to describe human trafficking

The history of slavery began in 6800 BCE and is currently diluted for the benefit of sensationalized media; this is an affront to the generational trauma of slavery.[1]The phrase “White Slavery” was coined in Europe in 1885 to crack down on prostitution and shut down brothels owned and operated by women who were not adhering to societal standards of “acceptable” behavior.[2]This puritanical assumption of “morality” was being pushed at a time when slavery was still happening unchecked across the globe. Just 20 years after the Emancipation Proclamation in the United States. The conceptual confusion between Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery is used to reinforce and advocate for goals with a language that is emotive, metaphorical and vague.[3]Black members of the NSN have raised objection to the use of slavery being conflated to erase chattel slavery still happening in Libya.[4]The deafening silence on chattel slavery in Africa while pushing “modern slavery” and anti-prostitution busts speaks volumes to the moral panic and erasure of slavery.

Specific to the United States, the language that frames human trafficking under an umbrella of modern slavery is problematic at its base. Both indigenous and African American persons have publicly opined that using the term slavery for human trafficking minimizes the history of the transatlantic slave trade and whitewashes the culpability of modern Caucasians who continue to hold wealth and benefit in a capitalist economy founded upon chattel slavery.

The NSN has chosen to discontinue the conflation of modern slavery and reference the heinous and egregious violations of human rights as human trafficking in an intentional effort to not exclude those with lived experiences of slavery or generational trauma from being enslaved. We recognize that slavery and trafficking are two different experiences that may correlate and have similar structural concepts but are not the same.

The National Survivor Network (NSN) is comprised of the shared experiences and richness each individual member brings to our community. We represent a diverse membership and share a community to support and uplift survivors from all forms of trafficking, to ensure all marginalized individuals share space at the table when it comes to policy, advocacy, and other efforts within the movement to end human trafficking. The NSN intentionally works to set aside privileged worldviews and reflect the myriad of experiences facing all individuals who are trafficked.

A movement is larger than any one individual within it. A movement is about our shared humanity and common goals. It is nurtured through constant reflection of our privileges and biases. It is built on our intentional intervention in problematic behaviors. We walk together to end human trafficking for all; no one gets left behind or excluded. The language we use must be intentional and support shared goals.

[1] <https://www.freetheslaves.net/about-slavery/slavery-in-history/>

[2] <https://walnet.org/csis/papers/irwin-wslavery.html>

[3] http://www.demandat.eu/sites/default/files/DemandAT_WP2_Cyrus_October_2015_FINAL.pdf

[4] <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/03/21/595497429/migrants-passing-through-libya-could-end-up-being-sold-as-slaves>