



Considering Cultural Context, Choice, Language, and Agency in Reporting on Sex Trafficking

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The issue of sex trafficking is complex and involves many people from different cultures, communities, backgrounds, and interests. To tell the stories surrounding this issue effectively involves understanding the factors that complicate these stories. Below I examine cultural context, the “sex work” / “forced prostitution” dichotomy, language used to categorize those involved in this issue, and considerations of agency and subjectivity for those who have been trafficked.

1. Cultural context

- Wherever a news event is happening, it should always be framed within the context in which it is playing out, regardless of where the reporter originates and the political stance of the publication.
- This means that the reporter is responsible for making some attempts at understanding that culture and that local community in whatever way possible. Rather than relying on your own assumptions and conclusions, find a local liaison who can “translate” the local culture for you (even if the locals speak your language).
- Even in the United States, different concerns and socioeconomic factors influence the issue of trafficking as it plays out within specific cultures, regions, and communities.
- **Best practices:** Keep in mind that there are not villains, heroes, and victims in the narrative of sex trafficking. There is a demand for sex in society, and traffickers fill that demand with workers in a continuous cycle. There are many factors involved in sex trafficking, from local to national culture, oppressive and unequal gender roles and expectations, socioeconomic systems of inequality, addiction, abuse, guilt, shame, self-loathing. All those involved in this narrative are also involved in these systems and these emotions.
- Try to avoid the hero-victim-savior narrative. It is too simplistic to reflect the complicated reality of sex trafficking.

2. The sex work spectrum: From choice to chance to trafficking

- Writing about sex trafficking requires some understanding of prostitution itself, and the continuum or spectrum on which the sale of sex might fall.

- Some sex workers choose and enjoy doing this type of work. These individuals usually prefer to be called “sex workers” rather than “prostitutes” due to the negative connotations associated with the latter term.
- Some people involved in sex work may desire to do another kind of work but may be limited in their options due to poverty, criminal record, and lack of education, among other possible factors.
- Some want to leave sex work but may remain for a variety of reasons, such as a love relationship with their trafficker, family members who need their support, family members who are being protected from harm if the sex worker continues prostituting, the feeling that their life in prostitution is better than any other possible option, or even shame and/or fear of leaving.
- Those who are trafficked are being forced to prostitute. They are not choosing this type of work though—considering their local and cultural contexts—they may have experienced limited options based on chance and may see this as the only option available to them. Sex trafficking is forced prostitution. If understood in context and framed in the voice of the trafficked (see tips below), it can be reported about in a way that does not remove the agency and subjectivity of the trafficked individual.
- **Best practices:** Educate yourself about the system of sex work and the spectrum on which this type of work falls. Avoid a simplistic view of the sale of sex and understand that there are many ways to perceive this industry. Do your best to understand the perspective of the worker or prostitute rather than falling back on your own perspective (which may be more of a judgment of sex work itself).
- Try to avoid simplistic classifications on an either/or scale (either voluntary sex work or forced prostitution). Much sex work falls in the gray area between these two.

3. Language and labels

- Framing a story includes significant journalistic choices in wording, phrasing, titling, captioning, and selecting images.
- Ask yourself if it’s possible to examine different perspectives, to allow for a “360-view” of the situation and those involved.
- Avoid “discursive erasure”: using labels to classify people and places into a limited category or to erase people entirely from the story based on the framing used.
- How do your subjects label themselves? What labels do they use for their lives and others? How do your subjects speak about this story / tell this story? Whenever possible, allow their voices to be heard directly with little to no editing.
- **Best practices:** Allow the voices of the trafficked person to be heard as much as possible. In [this American Public Radio news piece](#), cultural context is provided to explain various types of trafficking and the trafficked tell their own stories in their own words.
- Try to avoid using the word “victim.” This removes agency from the person you are reporting on and puts them in the position of object rather than subject of their story.

“Survivor” is an alternative option. Ideally, ask this person how they prefer to be labeled / discussed in the article.

4. Agency, identity, subjectivity

- This directly relates to the tip outlined above.
- In framing a story about trafficking, you are telling the story of unique people’s lives. They have moved through their world making decisions and acting on their surroundings, even in situations where the options for action were limited.
- Every person in every story should be seen as the active subject of their own story, not an object without agency who has been acted upon.
- The trafficked person usually has a complicated relationship to their trafficker and the circumstances in which they are being trafficked. The question is: how do they see themselves? What is their story and how do they tell it?
- All of the things that happen in a life—good, bad, terrible, wonderful—make up the whole identity of these subjects. Removing agency removes identity and subjectivity.
- **Best practices:** This UN Women [article provides three very different narratives of sex trafficking](#) (including one about birth trafficking), moving away from the simplistic victim framing to show the many reasons why some turn to this work and even return to it after leaving.
- Try to avoid speaking *for* the subjects in your story. Whenever possible, allow the voices of those who were involved to be heard directly.