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NO SUCH THING AS A YOUTH SEX WORKER

GUIDELINES FOR INCLUSIONARY AND
ACCURATE LANGUAGE ON PROSTITUTION
AND SEX TRAFFICKING IN HAWAI'I

By the Community Against Exploitation Hawai'i
and AF3IRM Hawai'i

INTRODUCTION

Too frequently media, law enforcement and State decisionmakers refer to any and all sexual conduct in exchange for something of value as “sex work,” excluding the vast majority of experiences in the sex trade. The term “sex work” is an inaccurate umbrella term for the spectrum of circumstances in the sex trade and their disabling consequences. “Work” ignores and minimizes the widespread sexual, mental and physical torment of minors, sex trafficking victims, Native people, undocumented people, LGBTQ people, and people involved in the sex trade who are not part of the political movement to legalize it.

The terms “sex work” and “sex worker” also conflate cam girls, strippers and sugar babies with people who have actually prostituted. This hides vast differences in socioeconomic status between people in the sex trade and allows the most privileged voices to speak with the same authority as the most harmed. In no other industry do we allow the least harmed such a platform to speak on current conditions and looked-for remedies.

“Sex work” is a political term used by the movement to create a legal sex industry. This pro-sex industry movement sometimes refers to itself as “Harm Reduction.” As evidenced in countries like New Zealand and Germany, the euphemism “sex work/er” does not deliver on its promise to destigmatize people involved in prostitution. Instead, “sex work” destigmatizes exploitation and makes men feel freer to buy sex.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT MINORS IN THE SEX TRADE

There is no such thing as a “youth sex worker” or “child prostitute.” There are however different reasons why a minor might be having transactional sex with adult men.

For example, a 17-year-old runaway might be desperate for shelter, food, drugs, or money. A 7-year-old might be under the control of an abusive relative. Both situations should be considered exploitation. Why?

Even if they are not under the control of a trafficker, the minor is 1) vulnerable due to age (it’s easy for adults to take advantage of minors) and 2) still being exploited by adults for sexual gratification. A person under 18 should never be referenced as “working” in relation to sex. The term “worker” dangerously implies money, benefits, negotiation, wages, hiring, firing, interviewing, and safety.

Federal law has caught up to the times and now defines minors under 18 trading sex with adults as exploited people.

Under federal law, whether someone is a sex trafficking victim is determined by age, not only the presence of a trafficker because minors cannot equally contend with the pressures of homelessness, hunger, economic desperation, and manipulation by older adults. States may extend the definition of youth to anyone up to 24 years old. There is no such thing in federal or Hawai’i state law as a “youth sex worker” or “underage prostitute.”

The term “sex worker” masks the coercion and manipulation minors routinely experience in the sex trade. Importantly, naming children as victims of commercial sexual exploitation shields them from victim-blaming and criminalization. Minors cannot be criminalized if by law they are defined as a victim.

CALLING A MINOR OF COLOR A "SEX WORKER" IS RACIST

It is a common form of unconscious bias and racism to “adultify” or project adult qualities like “agency” and “choice” onto children of color.

As Native Hawaiian women, Black women, and women of color, it is our cultural practice to protect, guide and heal youth from exploitation as they navigate abusive systems. It is not culturally appropriate to label minors of color with terms that “adultify” them and justify harm against them. It is also our duty to correct Western patriarchal messaging that girls and LGBTQ youth should get their self-worth from sexual attractiveness to men, that abuse is a normal component of love, and that our bodies are all we have to obtain power. We cannot fight child/familial abuse with commercial sexual abuse. Media should not use language like “sex work” that normalizes, downplays or promotes a system where mostly children of color get their needs met only if they perform sex acts for adults. We should not be in the business of choosing between child abuse in the home and child abuse in the streets.

TERMS TO AVOID FOR MINORS

- YOUTH SEX WORKER
- CHILD OR TEEN PROSTITUTE
- CHILD LABORER
- TEEN HOOKER
- UNDERAGE PROSTITUTE

TERMS TO USE INSTEAD

- EXPLOITED CHILD OR YOUTH
- SEX TRAFFICKING VICTIM
- COMMERCIAL SEXUALLY EXPLOITED CHILD
- CSEC VICTIM (CSEC= COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN)



THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PROSTITUTION AND SEX TRAFFICKING

“Prostitution and sex trafficking are legal terms of art with specific meanings in state and federal law.”

Prostitution is the act of engaging in sex acts for something of value, which is currently criminalized in Hawai'i. State law and law enforcement draw a black and white binary between prostitution and sex trafficking. This stark binary does not reflect the reality of most people in the sex trade. The law does not recognize general economic coercion as a legitimate form of coercion into the sex trade.

Sex trafficking is the most extreme way to recruit someone into the sex trade and make them prostitute for the trafficker's benefit. Hawai'i state law defines sex trafficking as compelling someone to prostitute by force, fraud, coercion and intimidation, or profiting from the prostitution of a minor.

Sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and other forms of human trafficking all have elements of significant violence and are crimes. The violence of trafficking is not limited to kidnapping or torture, although those forms of violence occur more often in cases that involve people of color. Grooming, manipulation, and tricking which leads to exploitative labor or sex are the most common elements of trafficking.



HOW TO TALK ABOUT ADULTS

We suggest use of the term “sex trade” over “sex work” or the “sex industry” because sex trade has been used historically before sex work and sex industry, and it accurately relates today’s practices to the slave trade and exploitative trading of humans for labor and sex.

The term “sex industry” implies work, a business, or a structured enterprise and is not well-suited for realities of the sex trade. The term sex trade also includes instances where the activity is not an overtly commercial activity like the WWII “comfort women” serving the Japanese Imperial Army. For example, survivors of comfort stations are still alive and advocating for justice but are being mislabeled as “sex workers” in media.

If we consider the majority of circumstances in the sex trade, the more accurate term would be exploitation, not “working” or “sex work.” The experience of prostituting resembles sexual abuse more than work for many people. Throughout a person’s life, no matter the age, they can be exploited whether they identify as exploited or not. The term “exploitation” can also destigmatize those involved by building empathy for people in the sex trade.

Support services for workers look very different than services for sexually exploited people. The term “work” takes away from what most children and adults experience in the sex trade because they have been sexually assaulted or abused repeatedly even in places where the system is legal. Due to the unique trauma across the sex trade, support needs to seem, feel and look different than it does for workers who do not face daily sexual trauma and health risks, including death by prostitution.

If there is one takeaway: refer to the person first and the action second. Use terms like person in the sex trade or person in prostitution. Labeling someone a ‘sex worker’ or ‘prostitute’ is dehumanizing.

TERMS FOR ADULTS

- PERSON IN THE SEX TRADE
- PERSON IN PROSTITUTION
- PERSON TRADING SEX
- SEX TRAFFICKING VICTIM (IF CASE COULD MEET FEDERAL/STATE CRITERIA)

TERMS FOR THE SYSTEM OF SEX FOR SALE

- SEX TRADE
- SYSTEM OF PROSTITUTION
- MILITARY-PROSTITUTION COMPLEX

TERMS FOR PEOPLE WHO BUY SEX

- BUYERS
- EXPLOITERS
- PERSON WHO COMMITTED COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION
- ABUSER

TERM FOR PEOPLE WHO COMPEL ANOTHER TO SEX FOR PERSONAL BENEFIT

- TRAFFICKER

TERM FOR COMMERCIAL SEXUAL CONTENT ONLINE

- ONLINE EXPLOITATION

WHO WE ARE

Community Against eXploitation (caXhi) is the only advocacy group on O'ahu led by those with lived experience in sex trafficking in Hawai'i's sex trade. We gravitate more towards being called lived experience experts than "sex trafficking survivors" or "sex trade survivors" because some of us do not identify with having survived. The term "survivor" can sound like a one-time ordeal that has ended. Some of us lived through multiple or varied experiences of sex trade-related harm throughout different times of our lives. We understand the magnitude of violence inflicted upon people from marginalized communities, and this violence is not limited to sex trafficking. Our exploitation has occurred through other forms of human trafficking, intimate partner violence, online/cyber violence and family/domestic violence. We offer a safe space free of judgment for people who share our experiences where we meet you where you are and support where you want to go. We hope to connect the community with lived-experience experts and survivors who serve as speakers, trainers, consultants, business matters, and more to assist in the fight against exploitation. Contact: hawaiiagainstexploitation@gmail.com

***AF3IRM** is an all-volunteer organization of Native Hawaiian, Black, Pacific Islander, and Asian women and LGBTQ people from communities heavily impacted by the sex trade, especially in the area of U.S. military bases. We fight to decriminalize and support lived experience experts. We also work to corrode the destructive ideas and behaviors fueled by the sex trade, which harm everyone. We run the only emergency relief fund for people involved in prostitution in Hawai'i. We passed the first and only state law that allows anyone in prostitution to vacate their conviction and expunge their record. We are leading bills during the 2022 Legislative Session to create a guaranteed income for anyone seeking to exit the sex trade and to allow sex trafficking survivors to hold the tourism industry accountable for financially benefiting from their exploitation. Contact: hawaii@af3irm.org*

Acknowledgment: This guide was inspired by the survivor-led No Such Thing campaign by Rights4Girls to end the criminalization and sexualization of children in the sex trade. We also acknowledge the influential work of Esperanza Fonseca drawing sharp focus on class differences within the sex trade and building unification of exploited classes.