

## How do we talk about this?

Unconsciously, the descriptive language we use and the labels we choose shape our thinking on everything, including sexual trafficking.

This psychological truth has worked in an insidious way in the last 30 years to change our thinking about prostituted persons.

### TERMS NOT TO USE:

**Sex work** and its derivatives (**commercial sex work/sex workers**, etc.) are terms that have been in use for the last twenty-plus years. The term originated in the early 1970s from a mix of libertarian activists and sex industry profiteers.

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 prostitution movement has succeeded in getting their nomenclature popularized the world over, including in the public health, social service, and anti-trafficking sectors. This change has occurred without difficulty since the one truth in their “rationale” is that the term “prostitute” contributes to the stigma, discrimination and violence experienced by “sex workers.”

**Prostitute:** The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines “prostitute” as: one who solicits and accepts payment for sex acts. This term is really used by most people as a pejorative label. It conjures up other labels like “whore,” “tramp,” “slut,” all of which infer that prostituting women are inherently and irredeemably bad, wicked, dirty people. The label does not take into account the harms that one experiences in prostitution, or how and why one became involved in the “trade.”

### TERMS TO USE:

Those who view all prostitution as a form of violence and exploitation advocate for the adoption of other terms. While accurately conveying the activity, the terms do not label the person involved as inherently bad, but also do not normalize prostitution. These terms include **prostituted persons, prostituted women, prostituted children, women in prostitution, and prostituting**. They are indicative of prostitution as an experience and an abuse, not a state of being. Phrases like **sex industry survivors** or **victims of commercial sexual exploitation** help express the idea that persons in the sex industry are caught up in a system that is inherently harmful and exploitive.

### Other Important Terms:

**Commercial sexual exploitation (CSE)** means sex acts entirely, or at least primarily, for financial or other economic interests. The economic exchanges involved may be monetary or non-monetary (i.e., food, shelter, drugs) but, in every case, involve maximum benefits to the exploiter and an abrogation of basic rights, dignity, autonomy, physical and mental well being of the person involved. Prostitution, live-sex shows, stripping and pornography are distinct yet inter-related elements that qualify as CSE.

**Sexual Trafficking** is the recruitment, transportation (within national or across international borders), transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons for the purposes of prostitution or other forms of commercial sexual exploitation. Sexual trafficking is accomplished by means of fraud, deception, threat of or use of force, abuse of a position of vulnerability, and other forms of coercion.

**Organized sexual exploitation** is a phrase that can be used in reference to and as a substitute for the “sex industry.” It more accurately conveys what the sex industry is—a massive organized system for the exploitation and commodification of sex.