This document explains why the U.S. movements against human trafficking should stop calling it “modern day slavery” or otherwise invoking the image of slavery by using terms like “abolition.” It was written in response to many conversations I had with my friends and associates, particularly fellow Black, indigenous and/or people of color activists and scholars. Thank you for being part of the struggle.

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This document explains why the U.S. movements against human trafficking should stop calling it “modern day slavery” or otherwise invoking the image of slavery by using terms like “abolition.” Please remember that this document is intended for people discussing human trafficking in the United States context, and may not necessarily apply to discussions outside of the United States.

1. In the U.S., the word “slavery” inevitably invokes the specific historical experiences of the enslavement of African peoples by the white settlers, which continues to negatively impact African Americans economically, politically, socially, and culturally today. Using the term “slavery” appropriates the historical and ongoing struggles of African American communities against the specific historical event of the Slavery and its aftermath.

2. Human trafficking is a crime: Slavery in the U.S. was criminal, but perfectly legal and supported by the full force of legal, economic, and political institutions. Human trafficking today does not receive such official backing, and cannot be compared to the Slavery. For example, courts today do not enforce contracts for trading humans nor the police detain and send back escaped trafficking victims to their traffickers.

3. It is the modern prison system, not contemporary human trafficking, that is the historical successor of the U.S. Slavery. The 13th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1865, abolished slavery “except as a punishment for crime,” and this caveat became a loophole to re-institute Black enslavement in the post-Reconstruction South under the guise of criminal punishment, where the State passed racist laws to criminalize freed slaves, then loaned out “convicts” as laborers to former slave owners. Modern prison system continues to criminalize and incarcerate African Americans at an extremely disproportionate rate while profiting corporations that build and manage prisons and employ prison labor at rates far below the legal minimum wage.

4. Like earlier “wars” on crimes, drugs, and terrorism, the government’s “war on trafficking” center primarily on surveilling, policing, and prosecuting African American and other communities of color, immigrants, street youth, and other communities that are already heavily criminalized. This includes targeting young people of color as “gangs” engaging in sex trafficking, profiling immigrants as both traffickers and trafficking victims at the border and beyond and harassing or excluding them, and treating queer and trans youth supporting each other engage in survival sex as “trafficking” each other. The simplistic rhetoric of “modern day slavery” misleads one into imagining more dehumanized kinds of enslaved people of color than addressing social, economic, and political roots of slavery, which remain unaddressed in order to rescue “modern day slaves,” criminalizing more enslaved communities, thereby reproducing and consolidating more power and oppression that make our communities vulnerable.

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