

**Human Trafficking
Speech Delivered by
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at
RAMP (Regional Anti-Trafficking Mobilization for Prevention)
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Thank you. It is both a pleasure and a great honor to be here with you this evening to kick off this important gathering on a topic of profound personal, and of course, global concern. I want to begin by thanking some of the people and organizations that have made this event possible and have dedicated so much over the years to our shared cause. First, a great thanks to our conference sponsors – Zonta International Foundation and the Tides Foundation – whose generous support has made this gathering and so much other important work possible. And I'd like to thank you, all our partners, governmental and nongovernmental, from across the region.

I have to say I think the title of this conference – “The Community Strikes Back” – is just wonderful and sums up beautifully why we are gathered here. Aside from what I assume was a cleverly disguised “STAR” Wars reference, I like the title for its emphasis on the critical role of the *community*, broadly conceived, in the effort to eliminate human trafficking and its root causes. And being a pretty rabid sports fan, I also like the

inference that, as the saying goes, “the best defense is a good offense.” We indeed need to strike back at this crime against human dignity and the criminals who benefit from it – and we need to do it by banding together with a full arsenal of ideas, approaches and tactics. Which is what each of you brings to the table and what we’re here to share these next few days.

As I’m sure it is for each of you who work on the front lines of this issue, it’s the individual stories of deprivation and the faces of young victims that I remember most and where I locate both my outrage and my hope. In my ten years at UNICEF, I met and spoke with children on every continent who had been beaten and raped, bought and sold, wrenched from home by conflict and forced to toil as soldiers and sex slaves. In the Philippines, for example, in 2005 I went to Manila North Harbor, a hotspot for the trafficking of women and children. There I visited a shelter for trafficked children, mostly women and young girls, who had been rescued from traffickers attempting to slip them through the busy seaport. Most of the victims were promised jobs as entertainers in Japan, or as domestic servants or factory workers, but instead were destined for the sex trade and a potential lifetime of exploitation. I can’t tell you how many scenes like this I’ve witnessed and I know you have all seen the same in your work.

As easy as it is to become demoralized by seeing the results, again and again, of our failure to protect the most innocent and vulnerable, I have always remained hopeful that change is possible. If my decade with UNICEF taught me anything, it is that this massive suffering of women and children and other victims is completely within our power to curtail. I've found we can look at any number of global crises, be it the widening gap between rich and poor nations, the AIDS pandemic, widespread war and genocide, and see in those crises not the inevitability of human suffering but a crisis of leadership at all levels, and a failure to make hard, necessary choices.

Back in that Manila port, I learned about a partnership that fights child trafficking on the big ferries that move among the islands there. It's a great, successful program that involves shipping firms, port authorities, local NGOs, harbor workers, police, and citizen whistle-blowers. I still remember when a local harbor policeman got up to speak about the role he and his colleagues play. He was nervous, and clearly unaccustomed to public speaking. Yet in his simple way he nonetheless spoke about human rights – and I could see the pride and dignity grow in him as he spoke. He had stepped up and taken a stand with whatever limited power he had vested in him and he was clearly changed by the experience. That example is as

heartening to me today as it was then and I'm sure you can all speak to similar moments you have had in your work.

Beyond those unforgettable faces and stories, of course, lies a battery of grim statistics – Grim as much for their mathematical uncertainty as for their tragic magnitude. Estimates of the numbers of trafficked persons worldwide range widely from the low end of 500,000 to the high end of 4 million a year. That margin of error in just counting the victims speaks volumes to the nature of the crime and the challenges we face in addressing it. What we do know for certain is that the majority of victims are female, most of them still children. As we all know, the already marginalized status of women in many societies puts them at greater risk to become affected by poverty and hardship, which in turn puts them at higher risk of being targeted by traffickers, who use false promises of jobs and educational opportunities to recruit their victims. Here in Southeast Europe we're talking about Roma children relegated to the fringes of society, young single mothers who have experienced war trauma or domestic violence, and women who have been economically marginalized by war and other factors. Their safety and security are precarious to begin with, making them easy prey for those who make their living through exploitation and greed.

We also know that in the high stakes world of organized crime, human trafficking is big business, generating an estimated US\$7-12 billion a year in profits for its perpetrators. There are sophisticated criminal networks behind these operations and as easy as it is to dehumanize and demonize the perpetrators of these crimes, their motives are universal and banal: profit and return on investment. Like any illicit trade, we need to successfully address both ends of the trafficking business – demand as well as supply – if we’re going to put an end to it.

At World Learning, we believe in the extraordinary capacity of communities to solve their own problems when they are empowered and equipped to do so. In our work here in Southeast Europe as well as in Africa and South America we’ve supported community-based efforts, working alongside local partners to tackle the root causes of trafficking. Through the STAR Network and our BATCOM and RAMP projects, funded by Zonta International Foundation, we’ve promoted cross-sector and cross-border network building, knowing that organized crime doesn’t recognize borders and therefore we can’t afford to either. Working with local NGOs like Buducnost Modrica, we’ve helped make the important case to government officials that Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country of origin for trafficking, not only of transit and destination. And we’ve worked with a host of partners

to address the core causes of migration – gender violence, poverty caused by war, and economic transition. Our philosophy, shared by you, our local partners, is not to blame those who seek a better life or a way out of hardship, but to advocate for strategies that give them reasons and the support they need to stay close to home. Over four years, STAR has seen police, prosecutors, journalists, teachers, social workers, NGOs and most importantly young people joining forces to stop trafficking. This enhanced regional capacity has born great fruits and should be a point of pride for all involved.

Wherever World Learning works we turn to local communities as the experts and support them to find lasting solutions. In Benin, that meant building bridges with a job skills training center so trafficked girls who returned home but were rejected by their families would have a safe haven in which to live and learn. In Peru and Ecuador, it meant using education to keep children away from the worst forms of child labor in the gold mines. And in Angola, it meant establishing an education center to provide literacy skills and professional training to abandoned and orphaned girls so they could avoid a life of prostitution or exploitative labor.

Of course, much as I'd like to stand here and declare that local NGOs and local government, banding together in solidarity, and building grassroots

programs can single-handedly put an end to this practice, we all know I'd be exaggerating. My time at UNICEF impressed upon me the great power, too often not exercised or misdirected, that national governments and the international community have at their disposal. To protect victims of trafficking, governments must ratify international legal standards that address all forms of exploitation and develop bilateral agreements for cross-border cooperation. While they're at it, these same governments need to address poverty, discrimination, domestic abuse and other deeply entrenched social factors head-on and at the highest levels of the law. In their zeal to make arrests and show progress, governments and the police who prosecute their laws need to stop treating the victims themselves as perpetrators. They need to be educated to understand that criminalizing women and children forced into the sex industry only deepens the vulnerability of these victims while letting the real criminals escape exposure and prosecution. Governments must take the time and do the hard work to cure the chronic roots of the problem and not just take the path of least resistance by addressing only the symptoms.

Increasingly, both the US government and the UN are recognizing the connection between the presence of international peacekeeping and international military forces in war-torn or transitional countries and a

corresponding rise in sex trafficking in those places. Arriving during or in the wake of war, these forces often drive prostitution and contribute to the exploitation of already vulnerable populations. In response, US military personnel, civilian employees and contractors now receive mandatory anti-trafficking training and US military police receive training to recognize and respond to the victims of trafficking. And thanks to 2005 legislation, US courts are now empowered to prosecute overseas federal employees who engage in trafficking.

Human trafficking is one of those great moral tests by which we, and our times, will ultimately be judged. Speaking just two weeks ago before both Houses of the British Parliament, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, speaking about the historic Trans-Atlantic slave trade, remarked that “In the long history of human wrongs, the trade in human beings will go down as one of the greatest crimes ever committed.” If only his words were only relevant to the distant past and of concern only to students of history. Unfortunately, the jury is still very much out and this greatest of crimes against humanity continues in new forms, with new victims. But as I saw with that harbor policeman in Manila who’s newly vigilant, and the journalist in Sarajevo who’s learning more sensitive ways to tell victims’ stories, and the politician in Benin who’s supporting education as a solution,

there is great hope and strength and goodness and capacity out there just waiting to be tapped and steered in the direction of change.

I want to leave you with a favorite, inspiring quote that was first spoken in a very different time and place against a different form of injustice, but still speaks, I think, to why we wake up every day and do what we do. It's from Robert Kennedy: "Each time a man [person] stands for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance." That's what each of you represents – ripples of hope forming a mighty current of change.

Thank you and here's to an excellent and productive conference.