

Remarks by Melanne Vermeer
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On behalf of the Vital Voices Global Partnership, I want to express our gratitude to Ambassador Baker and the US Embassy staff, especially Ann Kambara, for taking the lead in bringing us together for this important gathering.

Vital Voices is pleased to be able to cosponsor this conference with the US Embassy and the International Labor Organization, and to be able to make it possible for the many experts from our Vital Voices network, who are on the frontlines in combating trafficking in their countries, to be here with us.

It is wonderful to be in this great country and to be in the presence of so many who are working so hard to combat this global scourge.

I would personally like to recognize the leadership of Senator Nancy Kassebaum Baker. Those of you here in Japan know her as the wife of the US Ambassador, but she has had a very distinguished career in US politics, having been elected to three terms in the Senate. As a Member of the Foreign Relations Committee and through her related work in the Senate, she has been committed to combating human trafficking. She has always worked on this issue, and on so many others, in a spirit of collegiality and bipartisanship. She is an example to all on how we must come together across partisan lines and any other divisions to advance the common good. So, Nancy, thank you for all you've done to bring us to this day.

The trafficking of human beings is one of the most profound violations of human rights. It is also a serious law enforcement issue, a growing health challenge with the HIV/AIDS pandemic and it has serious national security implications.

Each year, at least one million human beings, predominantly women and children, but men too, are shipped across national boundaries and sold into what has become modern day slavery. No country is immune from this problem. The US and Japan, for example, are destination countries. We are all up against a flourishing criminal industry – generating billions of dollars, which in too many places is still unconstrained by law enforcement. Traffickers derive enormous profits from their sales because of the relatively low risk of prosecution. Their work is often facilitated by corrupt politicians. In many ways selling human beings is less risky than selling drugs, which often commands higher penalties. Routes used to ship illegal drugs and arms are being used today to ship human beings.

No country can eradicate trafficking by itself because the problem is international in scope. With victims moving between countries and through countries, progress is only

possible through our mutual cooperation. The many representatives of governments, NGOs and international organizations represented here demonstrates how committed you are to confronting this tough challenge. I hope that over the next two days, we will create concrete plans for actions, in order to work more effectively in our own countries and in coordination with each other. It's been said that the criminals are organized, but we are not. We should not give anyone justification to make that statement again.

Many of you have firsthand experience working on this issue. You know that people who are trafficked are desperate for economic opportunity. They think they are applying for jobs as waitresses, laborers, entertainers or child care providers, only to find themselves in an unimaginable nightmare living in virtual captivity. Enticed through false advertising and deceptive offers, they fall prey to the organized criminal networks.

Trafficking has exploded in recent years because of a combination of factors---factors that include highly organized and growing criminal networks that use local operatives to prey on vulnerable people who are trapped in poverty; the demand for cheap labor; markets in countries with a large sex industry and the relatively newly opened borders in many places that were once closed societies. Information technology and the ease of transportation have also been utilized by traffickers to serve their criminal ends.

I first came to this issue as a government official. Today I work to address it as a member of the NGO community. Both government and NGOs have important roles to play.

In the mid-1990's, working in the White House, I began to hear from US NGOs – some of whom were protecting victims of trafficking who had escaped from their captors. The NGO representatives said they were worried that they were breaking the law because the trafficked women were in the US illegally, but they added they felt they had to protect them for humanitarian reasons. They also didn't understand why the women should be punished with deportation when the criminals who trafficked them to the US under false pretenses, were evading punishment. They said, "Something needs to be done."

Around the same time, women NGO representatives from the former Soviet Union gathered in Vienna, Austria, for a Vital Voices Conference to learn how to become effective as citizen activists in democracy building and in creating economic opportunity. They told us about family members and others in their communities who had disappeared – who had gone off with offers of good jobs, never to be heard from again. And the NGOs couldn't get anyone in their governments to pay attention. They too said, "Something needs to be done."

These voices of NGOs on the frontlines in the US and in many source countries in Eastern Europe were reaching out to our government. As one of our first steps, the US commissioned a study, which was the first comprehensive look at the scope and magnitude of the trafficking problem and the links to organized crime. It was a serious global threat. Members of the US Congress from both of our political parties were also responding to concerns that were being raised.

In 1998, President Clinton issued an Executive Order that set out a US strategy to combat trafficking based on the principles of prevention, protection of the victims and prosecution of the perpetrators of these crimes. He called on all levels of the US government to work together and ordered the President's Interagency Council on Women to develop and coordinate the effort.

The legislative drafting was not always easy. There were differences of opinion within the Administration among the various agencies, and there were differences in the Congress and between the Congress and the Administration. The decisions involved affected immigration policies or our diplomatic relations with other countries. The White House remained focused and pushed for the resolution of the differences in order to gain passage of a comprehensive anti-trafficking law. We knew that only such a law would protect the victims and crackdown on the perpetrators.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act was signed into law in 2000, and it was reauthorized by Congress last year and signed into law by President Bush.

The US law provides for:

*PREVENTION – measures like public awareness and other education campaigns to alert women and girls in urban and rural areas of the threat. At its root, the best prevention program is access to economic opportunity. Viable work alternatives need to be a critical component of any prevention strategy;

*PROTECTION and assistance to the victims like hotlines, shelters, medical care and other counseling. A new temporary visa (T-visa) was created to prevent immediate deportation of the victims. The victims were encouraged to participate in the investigation or prosecution of the perpetrators of the crime against them;

*PROSECUTION of the perpetrators under the new law which included a stiff new criminal statute and tough penalties. It meant bringing investigations and prosecutions and giving law enforcement the tools that it needed. Training for law enforcement officers -- the police, immigration officials and judges -- is critical. Prosecution also requires investigation of document fraud, official corruption and witness protection programs, as well as regional cooperation.

The law provides us in the US with a very important tool to confront the traffickers and to assist the victims.

To succeed in combating trafficking, all of us need to coordinate our efforts – between NGOs and government, within countries and between countries. Vital Voices works to raise public awareness about human trafficking in the US and internationally. We produce an electronic newsletter to keep anti-trafficking advocates and policymakers in the US and elsewhere informed of current developments. We also make available an online anti-trafficking toolkit - a resource to inform law enforcement, healthcare

professionals and other service providers. Emergency assistance information and health bulletins have been translated into several languages. We also work with officials and activists in other countries to promote effective partnerships among government agencies, NGOs, the media and other sectors of society. Our training programs are designed to strengthen outreach networks and to provide assistance in drafting anti-trafficking legislation.

In thinking about the tough challenge that we all confront, I was reminded of the work of the great Japanese writer, Matsuo Basho in "Narrow Road to Okku." Three hundred years ago, he wrote about a long and often arduous journey that he undertook on foot. He recounted the experience in his literary work. At one point, he stopped to pray for "strong legs" needed for his journey. He wrote, "In summer mountains, I bow before his high clogs, my journey just begun."

We are on a different kind of journey, but it too is often arduous and challenging and we too will need "strong legs." So many people are depending on us. We cannot let them down. If we work together, we will prevail in combating human trafficking.

Thank you.