

# COMPARING AND CONTRASTING APPROACHES TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING

IN UNITED NATIONS ORGANIZATIONS



UNITED NATIONS  
**HUMAN RIGHTS**  
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER



**UNHCR**  
The UN  
Refugee Agency



**UNODC**  
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



**IJPC** INTERCOMMUNITY  
JUSTICE AND  
PEACE CENTER

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# CONTEXT

While the issue of human trafficking is not new, Americans have become more aware of it after the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000.

Since then, a lot of work has been done in the field to advocate against human trafficking, but the general public's knowledge of the issue continues to be fed by media stereotypes.

When discussing human trafficking, it is critical that we use inclusive narratives and research-based truths in order to better educate society and respect survivors. **Our words matter!**

Because human trafficking is a local, regional, and global challenge to address, this document profiles three United Nations organizations that lead the effort worldwide. **Do the UNODC, UNHCR, and OHCHR face similar pitfalls in language and imagery that domestic organizations face?**

**How to read this tool:** the three organizations are in a compare/contrast chart followed by individual profiles. In the chart, **red** signifies harmful messaging, **black** signifies neutral or adequate messaging, and **green** signifies good messaging.



# COMPARE AND CONTRAST APPROACHES

	UNODC CRIME	UNHCR REFUGEES	OHCHR HUMAN RIGHTS
LANGUAGE USED TO DESCRIBE THE ISSUE	Human Trafficking	Trafficking in persons	Trafficking in persons, <b>Slavery</b>
LANGUAGE USED TO DESCRIBE THE ISSUE	<b>Victims</b>	<b>Victims</b>	<b>Victims</b> , Invisible <b>survivors</b>
LANGUAGE USED TO DESCRIBE THE ISSUE	Traffickers, <b>Perpetrator</b>	Traffickers	<b>Not Mentioned</b>
FIRST IMAGE ON THEIR TRAFFICKING PAGE	<b>Black and white photo of a light skinned person appearing to be female, with their mouth covered by a darker skinned hand</b>	Darker skinned child who appears to be female, in a forest, holding a photo of other diverse children in front of their face	Darker skinned child who appears to be female, looking into the camera, next to a pile of fabric
OTHER IMAGERY	<b>Graphics made with cartoons and icons, Shadowy figure in black and white at night</b>	Diverse photos of people in different environments	<b>Photo of darker skinned children appearing to be female, holding on to a fence, looking out a window</b>



# UNODC

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



# UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME

UNODC – CRIME

## UNODC CRIME

Human Trafficking

Victims

Traffickers,  
Perpetrator

Black and white photo of a light skinned person appearing to be female, with their mouth covered by a darker skinned hand

Graphics made with cartoons and icons, Shadowy figure in black and white at night

### Who is UNODC?

UNODC contributes to global peace and security, human rights and development by making the world safer from drugs, organized crime, corruption and terrorism through support for rule of law.

### What do their words mean?

When UNODC uses "victim" over "survivor" they send the false message that all people experiencing trafficking understand they're being victimized. The word also doesn't focus on their strength and resiliency. Both "victim" and "perpetrator" are common terms used in the law enforcement and legal community, which might explain their use. Using people-first language is better to explain the situation, however.

### What do their images mean?

The first image on their trafficking page sends the wrong message that human trafficking only affects light skinned people appearing to be female, and that they are physically unable to speak up. On the other hand, UNODC does a great job by portraying the actions of human trafficking by using cartoons and icons, instead of real photos of the crimes.

### Why do their words matter?

UNODC is an agency that connects with smaller organizations worldwide, and how they approach the global issue of human trafficking can set the tone for local and regional organizations.

LANGUAGE  
USED TO  
DESCRIBE  
THE ISSUE

LANGUAGE  
USED TO  
DESCRIBE  
THE PEOPLE

LANGUAGE  
USED TO  
DESCRIBE  
THE PEOPLE

FIRST IMAGE  
ON THEIR  
TRAFFICKING  
PAGE

OTHER  
IMAGERY



**UNHCR**  
The UN  
Refugee Agency





# UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

UNHCR – REFUGEES

## UNHCR REFUGEES

**LANGUAGE  
USED TO  
DESCRIBE  
THE ISSUE**

Trafficking in persons

**LANGUAGE  
USED TO  
DESCRIBE  
THE PEOPLE**

Victims

**LANGUAGE  
USED TO  
DESCRIBE  
THE PEOPLE**

Traffickers

**FIRST IMAGE  
ON THEIR  
TRAFFICKING  
PAGE**

Darker skinned child who appears to be female, in a forest, holding a photo of other diverse children in front of their face

**OTHER  
IMAGERY**

Diverse photos of people in different environments

### **Who is UNHCR?**

UNHCR is a UN agency mandated to aid and protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities, and stateless people, and to assist in their voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement to a third country.

### **What do their words mean?**

When UNHCR uses "victim" over "survivor" they send the false message that all people experiencing trafficking understand they're being victimized. The word also doesn't focus on their strength and resiliency.

### **What do their images mean?**

The first image on their trafficking page is good, but not great. Widely accepted messaging guidelines suggest not using pictures of kids at all when discussing human trafficking. Showing a picture of a particular type of child (race, gender, assumed country of origin) limits the audience's idea of who can be victimized.

### **Why do their words matter?**

UNHCR is an agency that works with refugees around the world. Accurate and non-stigmatizing wording affects how human trafficking is spotted as people are in a vulnerable position during displacement.



UNITED NATIONS  
**HUMAN RIGHTS**  
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER



# OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

OHCHR – HUMAN RIGHTS

## OHCHR HUMAN RIGHTS

### LANGUAGE USED TO DESCRIBE THE ISSUE

Trafficking in persons,  
Slavery

### LANGUAGE USED TO DESCRIBE THE PEOPLE

Victims  
Invisible survivors

### LANGUAGE USED TO DESCRIBE THE PEOPLE

Not Mentioned

### FIRST IMAGE ON THEIR TRAFFICKING PAGE

Darker skinned child  
who appears to be  
female, looking into the  
camera, next to a pile of  
fabric

### OTHER IMAGERY

Photo of darker skinned  
children appearing to be  
female, holding on to a  
fence, looking out a window

### Who is OHCHR?

OHCHR promotes and protects human rights that are guaranteed under international law and stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.

### What do their words mean?

When OHCHR portrays human trafficking as "slavery," it sends the false message that all human trafficking victims are legally owned as property, like that of historical chattel slavery. While both things are related, using this language draws attention away from the experiences of people whose families were actually forced into slavery. When OHCHR uses "victim" over "survivor" they send the false message that all people experiencing trafficking understand they're being victimized. Using both terms, "victim" and "survivor," sends mixed messages. There is no mention of the other person involved in trafficking situations: the person doing the harm.

### What do their images mean?

The first image on their trafficking page is good, but not great. Widely accepted messaging guidelines suggest not using pictures of kids at all when discussing human trafficking. Showing a picture of a particular type of child (race, gender, assumed country of origin) limits the audience's idea of who can be victimized. The images also send the message that there are physical barriers that prevent them from being free.

### Why do their words matter?

OHCHR is an agency that defines and responds to human rights violations. Showing that they understand the sensitivity of accurate portrayal of human trafficking lends confidence to their actions.



# SOURCES

## United Nations Websites

- [UNODC](http://www.unodc.org): www.unodc.org
- [UNHCR](http://www.unhcr.org): www.unhcr.org
- [OHCHR](http://www.ohchr.org): www.ohchr.org



## Learn More about Messaging Guidelines

- The Do's and Don'ts of Human Trafficking Awareness [PDF](#)
- Words Matter: Language, Imagery and Storytelling in Human Trafficking Awareness [Video Recording](#)
- Holding Advocacy Groups, and Ourselves, Accountable on the Human Trafficking Narrative [Blog Post by IJPC Intern](#)
- Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center [Website](#)



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