

**Speech by Karen Emmons, Journalist, at the COMMIT Senior Officials Meeting
in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on 28 April 2015**

Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Senior Officials,
Members of the anti-trafficking community,

I appreciate this privilege to speak with you.

A few years ago, a woman in Hong Kong told Susie, a domestic worker from Indonesia working in her house: “I’m rich. I can do *whatever* I want to you and no one will know.”

That woman was recently sentenced to seven years in prison for burning, beating and battering another young Indonesian domestic worker she had employed after Susie had been rescued by her family. The woman is in prison largely because of media attention and government action.

That kind of synergy between the media and government is what I want to talk about today.

Two years ago I started a photojournalism advocacy project, intended for use in the media and as a travelling exhibition. You passed the work on your way into this room. If you have looked already, you may have noticed Susie from Hong

Kong. The photos also will be on exhibit at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Cambodia for the month of May.

The work focuses on one area within a range of many domestic workers problems, including human trafficking – I narrowed in on the physical abuse because it is such an atrocious but barely spoken-about issue. I wanted to feature the abuse because it is visual and could help tell the rest of the story.

I have encountered a range of reactions to the project – from it being sensational or unbalanced to 'not for our readers on a Sunday morning' to 'My God, this is incredibly powerful' and 'I never heard of such abuse'.

Even some organizations working on the same issue had mixed reactions. In particular, there was much debate regarding two important exhibitions because someone worried, perhaps pre-emptively – that the pictures might offend someone in a government.

Wonderfully, you're not afraid and I am here today talking about the work with you. But it underscores one of the points I want to impress – issues, problems can't be hidden. One way or another, they surface. The days of controlling what becomes public – what stays out of the public eye is slipping away as social media takes an increasingly firm grasp of our lives.

But the opportunities to influence and make use of the media are plentiful. Those who win in today's media reality are those who don't try to prevent information

from being made public – they understand how it influences opinion and attitudes.

More critically, they also understand how the media *reflects* emerging public opinion.

Those people get good at using today's media reality to their ends.

If you want to fight abuse and human trafficking, media coverage of these issues can be a powerful force for good. The critical challenge for everybody in this room is to consider HOW you can work with the media – traditional and other channels – to influence the message – to *influence the narrative* of the story.

Do you want to be reported as doing too little or nothing at all? Or worse, hypocritical if you promise huge change but don't deliver? Or do you want to be shown doing what you can within the complexities?

I'd like to use my work on the physical abuse of domestic workers and a few other stories to reinforce the need for government and the media to work as allies and to give you a few ideas of how to do that.

[My project]

My documentary project is titled No One Should Work This Way and focuses on the physical abuse that domestic workers have experienced at the hands of their employers.

I set out looking for scars to photograph because I wanted to show the evidence of what is taking place behind locked doors and with virtual impunity. I wanted to show the impact.

People who cover human trafficking come up against the same challenge: how to document what can't be seen. I've read countless reports on human trafficking and countless times I've read how difficult it is to get information. But it can be done.

In my project, I wanted to show how personal the violence is. And how lifelong it is and how it affects families. I had read many reports of domestic worker abuse, but after a while, it took on an abstract dimension. There were names, but no faces. There were descriptions, but no images.

When it's not personal, it's easy to put it out of mind. Images help to ensure that the details stick.

Images help make the laws – or their enforcement – more personal.

What does that mean?

I saw the women we photographed as the mothers and daughters they are; women who simply wanted to earn a decent living to educate their children or just feed them or help their parents repair a roof. I couldn't ignore them and I

hoped that other people who saw the photos and read their stories wouldn't either.

With a small grant from the International Labour Organization, the photographer, Steve McCurry, and I travelled to Indonesia, Philippines, Nepal and Hong Kong. We went where the abused women lived, had returned to. They had worked in several countries of the Middle East and across Asia.

Of the 34 women and one boy we've met so far the abuse occurred almost evenly between the two regions. Their abusers were almost evenly divided between women and men.

To my surprise, we met people who were clearly trafficked: two had been sold into domestic work when they were young girls. Several were locked up and forbidden to leave the house or talk to anyone. We included a few children to further illustrate the many facets of domestic worker abuse.

In Hong Kong we started including activists to tell from their point of view what is being done to improve the situation and what more needs to be done.

[Domino effect]

I worked with one of the world's best photographers, Steve McCurry, known for his portrait of the Afghan girl that appeared on the cover of National Geographic. We had worked together on an AIDS project for The Global Fund. I thought his

style and his reputation for taking perhaps the world's most iconic portrait would bring a reverence to the issue, elevate its stature and open doors.

It did and it didn't. Several editors turned down publishing the photos, saying they weren't "right" for a particular publication or not "right" for their readers.

What they meant was that these photos are too depressing or shocking. Maybe, some editors want to spare their readers the uncomfortable truth that ordinary people are capable of extraordinary cruel acts.

If you look at the photos, and I really hope you do, you will see that not everyone has physical scars. But some do, and, indeed, they are hard to look at.

This is another point I want to impress upon you: not every story is easy to look at or read about – nor should it be. People are suffering, and we all have a responsibility not to hide it but to redress it.

These photos are indicative of abuse that goes on in every country. Just because a country is not mentioned in my project does not mean the problem does not occur there. The same is true for human trafficking – as a group, you have been working on this issue for a decade now, you are well aware how universal a problem it is.

Ultimately, the photos in my project were featured by The New York Times photography *online blog*, which then led to a couple of photos appearing in the

international edition, on page 2 – right where we wanted it. And from there other papers in the US, the Middle East, Europe and Asia ran many of the photos.

We are now seeing that domino effect with the recent Associated Press story on the trafficking of men into the fishing industry. That story inspired a crowd of journalists to cover the issue from varying perspectives. It also led to the rescue of more than 500 fishermen in Indonesia – a country very integral to the human trafficking problem in this region.

That story is also a good example of a government coming out the hero of the day. Much of what AP wrote about has been known. AP had good access and connected many dots with that story – they connected the story to the businesses and the end market. Those are the stories the trafficking issue needs more of.

The Indonesian government moved quickly and pulled together agencies to rescue and repatriate those fishermen. The government response was seen as positive. By acting proactively and being open about it – they influenced the narrative.

[Helping media understand complexity]

Journalists aren't always in complete control. Editors are a tremendous source of frustration for many journalists. Many seasoned journalists in the field work for younger editors who are not familiar with regional histories, with political, cultural or economic nuances. Some make shallow demands on journalists. Some just turn away from important stories.

Complex issues, such as with human trafficking, can seem difficult for media coverage. Sometimes you have to spend time explaining. For example, in Bangladesh after the tragic collapse of a garment factory, the crowd of journalists on that scene thought the story was about shutting down unsafe factories in Dhaka because they didn't understand what the appropriate action should be.

Media savvy people in the UN and the government there, through press conferences and through repeated and strategic direct conversation with journalists, said, hang on – if you take away the factories, young women in need of work suffer even worse. The story is about making work conditions safe and decent. The media ran with that story.

This is an example of organizations and government working with the media to a constructive end.

[Social media]

Social media, on the other hand, feels like it's turning our worlds upside down. In an instant, lives are changing – for better and for far worse.

A friend told me recently that he asked a room of 30 executives in Bangkok how many had held a newspaper that day. Five answered yes. Who had read a digital newspaper? Three answered yes. Then he asked who had read their Line? All of them said yes. Line, as I was informed, is a new social media forum in which friends pass around news stories, notes and other bits within their network. It

gives massive new meaning to “word travels fast”. He told me that 36 million people in Thailand – half the population – are online.

Social media probably had a lot to do with the jailing of the Hong Kong employer I first mentioned. It started with one photo. Maybe two. The first image was of the horribly battered young Indonesian domestic worker in a hospital bed. She was covered in bruises and burns and scars. Her face was swollen almost beyond recognition. The image swooped through social media.

A savvy wire service editor checked the young woman’s Facebook page and found a contrasting image of her beaming with a cheery smile, like a hopeful university student. The contrast was even more powerful.

Within days, the general public joined activists in the streets calling for change. The government listened, investigated and cracked down.

Without journalists doing their work, policymakers may not be aware of the flaws in policy or regulations or the degree of problems. Or they may not be able to harness public support as easily.

[Influencing and reflecting public opinion]

I came of professional age working at LIFE magazine, known for its photography and images from around the world. While there, I learned the power of photographs and in telling visual stories.

I also learned as a young journalist that people want to talk about what has happened to them. Talking to the media is empowering – even for so-called victims. If treated respectfully, they are given a moment to make a statement about what has happened to them. Many of them hope it might help others.

And I think that accountability means that what goes on within our societies must be made public to feed into the ongoing common debate about how we want to live together as a decent society.

Stories of abuse and suffering must be told. But so, too, must stories of hope and impact.

For example, The Global Fund project that I worked on with Steve McCurry years ago involved teams of journalists each assigned a country. We went to Vietnam. We spent a week with several people who were just starting their AIDS treatment. We went back months later to see how their lives had changed to show what a difference treatment makes.

The Global Fund invested a million dollars on this work. Its return is calculated in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The exhibition opened in a Washington DC museum where dozens of members of the US Congress saw it.

The Japanese Prime Minister increased his country's contributions to the Global Fund by 20%, to nearly US\$300 million a year, after having spent half an hour at

the exhibition in Tokyo. The exhibit has been shown in 11 cities and is still touring, nine years later.

Whether it's through a series of exhibitions or strong feature stories in newspapers, magazines, online, on television or in the movie theatre, the media has the greatest capacity to affect public opinion.

It doesn't change an issue but it can change the public's perceptions of an issue. It can create the public support that encourages – and empowers – policy makers to act.

It also captures how public perception *has changed*.

CNN and The Guardian have run powerful series of stories on trafficking – there is argument they did it not only because it is horrible abuse but because they were in touch with the public mood. They understood that the public agrees more protection is needed for migrants.

Think back to issues like AIDS, domestic violence and the hunting of endangered animals. A decade or two ago, these were seen as sad features of life but not something the world could do anything dramatic about.

It was considered impossible to provide AIDS treatment to people in poor countries. Now, it is immoral not to offer it to everyone.

Domestic violence was something no one wanted to talk about and not perceived as a crime – and as a result, little was done about it. Now, people are prosecuted for it.

Trade in ivory and other parts of endangered animals still goes on, but at a fraction of the scale of the past and only despite coordinated, international enforcement efforts. It is increasingly considered publically unacceptable.

What all these issues have in common is that media and activist organizations brought knowledge about the issues to a general audience; there was an open debate that changed the moral boundaries and made it impossible for individuals and governments to accept that decent societies tolerate it.

The moment seems to be coming for the same paradigm shift in the view of human trafficking: Some change is already happening, and more may happen soon. But meaningful change will come much more quickly and easily if ordinary people demand that human trafficking no longer be accepted in their societies.

[Media as an ally]

To achieve that, make media your ally. That does not mean make the media your partner or your best friend. The media will expose you if given reason. But it will applaud you just as easily when given reason.

Respect what the media can do for you.

Understand how media works: daily media is not there to promote your cause – they are there to provide news and information (and, increasingly, entertainment).

But know also, there is an increasing trend of journalists as advocates, such as my project, who do frame their work around a message. In my case, I wanted to encourage labour law protection and ratification of the ILO Convention on domestic workers.

[My motivation]

I know that the physical abuse is a small portion of the many problems that domestic workers experience – which includes excessive hours, little or no pay, inadequate food, no days off, inhumane accommodation, no freedom of movement, no social security or insurance benefits and, in most countries, no labour law protection.

But the International Labour Organization estimates there are 52 million domestic workers in the world. So even if only one in a thousand experience physical or sexual abuse, it's still a huge problem, affecting more than half a million women.

I also believe that even a few cases are unacceptable. No one should work this way – in the name of human decency. I also know you can't legislate decency. But you can enforce consequences of indecency.

International law, international treaties and national laws and constitutions specify equal and decent conditions for all people. In signing those treaties, in legislating protection and standards of human decency and in operating with public funds, governments accept their responsibility. It is a promise to the greater public to uphold the letter and purpose of those agreements.

As a journalist, I think it is my job to point out breaches of that promise.

In some instances, the government may not be aware of a problem, or at least the extent of the problem. In some instances, worldwide, elements within the government are a part of the problem. In all instances, it may take public engagement and pressure to confront the problem.

[What can be done]

Abuse can only happen when the chances of being exposed are negligible. Good media coverage can tell abusers someone is watching.

This was another strong motivation behind my documentary project. I wanted the household employers to know that someone, many people, maybe even their neighbors, know what is going on inside their home.

In societies that value all human life as equal, the shame of being seen as an abuser is as strong a deterrent as the threat of punishment.

Shame, however, may not be so effective with human traffickers. But by shining a light on these practices, again and again, it makes the criminal activities much harder.

What can governments do?

Earlier I said understand how the media works. That also means understand that governments and the media each has something that benefits the other: journalists need access to information and governments need access to the public. Tap into that synergy by providing background briefs or media trips – but with clear ground rules. Respond in time for media deadlines. Understand that MOUs, action plans and agreements are not the news. The results, the impact on people is what journalists need to report on.

Take the issue to a human level...encourage stories of the people involved. Budget adequate amounts of money on communications. Be creative, use exhibitions, art, music, events. Choose a number of good and thorough reporters and columnists and make them allies; keep them informed. Ultimately, don't be afraid of the media.

When I asked other journalists how they would like to better work with government, all of them said: Just please answer the phone. Explain what is going on. Don't hide.

In Asia, the role of the media in society is still a work in progress. In some countries, journalists are harassed, imprisoned and even murdered for doing their job – even for covering trafficking issues.

But keeping quiet about issues is no longer an option. People in government must decide whether and how they want to influence the narrative of their work.

The point of my story today is to persuade you to use the media as an ally – do not fear the messenger. I think you all understand this sufficiently, but the message needs to echo throughout all levels of government.

Thank you.