

SMART Director Luis C.deBaca
“A Path Appears”
Opening Remarks at Meridian International Center
January 13, 2015

Good evening and welcome everyone to the Meridian International Center and tonight’s event “A Path Appears.”

We come together tonight with a sense of shared commitment. A commitment to equality and justice for women and girls worldwide. A commitment to stand up to sexual abuse, gender-based violence, and all of the devastating effects that follow.

Because as the world is starting to realize, violence and crime undercuts development not just through the obvious effect of corruption, but because communities who are left unprotected cannot advance past the daily threat of abuse. Girls and women cannot thrive if those who abuse them are effectively immune from punishment.

The many efforts to support girls’ education and small business empowerment can be unraveled by the physical and mental fallout from abuse – which can be so devastating not just to the individual victim but to her family and community. Parents have to make horrible choices between keeping girls at home or sending them to school, knowing they risk sexual assault, kidnapping, or being trafficked.

We also come together tonight with a realization this this is not just a problem “over there.” Sexual abuse -- whether by a stranger, an acquaintance, or a family member or in the form of human trafficking involving commercial sexual exploitation of children or adults -- is a problem here in America as well. That’s why I’m proud to have returned to the Justice Department, where the Office of Justice Programs is confronting sexual abuse on campuses, in our communities, and in Indian Country. Through an integrated approach, we are addressing prevention, victims’ needs, and the ongoing challenges of dealing with sex offenders.

One of the challenges in this work is thinking about how to prevent sexual abuse from happening in the first place. How to teach and inspire a generation for whom manliness is about responsibility, not about asserting power over women and girls. How to undercut the demand for commercial sex and implicit assumptions that women’s bodies are a commodity. It is a long road ahead, and it sometimes seems impossible.

Activism often starts with recognition and a call to action, but so often that initial inspiration sputters out, as the desire to engage is not matched by an obvious means of getting involved. But, rather than getting discouraged, we have to trust that a path will appear. And if it doesn't, that we can make one.

On that path, we need guides, and you'll meet some of them tonight. Heroes who have lived through the pain and are not just able to inspire but can contribute to the policy discussion. Activists who put themselves on the line to walk with survivors on their journey to recovery. Artists who use their skills to tell the truth about subjects that others would prefer to gloss over. Journalists and filmmakers who clarify and enlighten...

...Brought together and so well reported by Sheryl WuDunn and Nicolas Kristof, who have the rare talent to bring inspiration and drama into their description of research and evidence-based strategies.

Reflecting on Sheryl and Nick's project, President Clinton has said that they challenge us to act. To realize that "just because we can't do everything doesn't mean we shouldn't do something."

In that spirit, as we watch this excerpt from the film and participate in tonight's panel, let us not only confront these horrible realities, but consider what that "something" will be for each of us. And, through our footsteps on that shared journey, let us build first a path, then a road, then a highway, of hope.