



June 27, 2016

To: Reporters, Editors and Producers
From: Yasmin Vafa, Executive Director, Rights4Girls
Re: The Oakland Police Crisis and Trafficked Girls

One aspect of the Oakland police crisis involves charges that police officers exchanged favors for sex with an underage girl, which has resulted in reporting about “underage sex workers” and similar terms.

As this crisis continues to unfold we want to make sure your reporting is accurate and reflects the reality facing underage girls who are trafficked for sex.

First, we want to make clear: there is no such thing as a “child prostitute,” or similar terms. There is no difference between paying to rape a child and raping a child; all victims of child sex abuse should be treated the same way.

You should be aware that The Associated Press recently changed its Stylebook to discourage the use of the term “child prostitute” and similar variations on the phrase. This change came after more than a year of intense advocacy from those of us who have been fighting to change the way that America treats underage girls who are trafficked for sex. Our goal is to stop arrests of trafficked children and instead get them the support they need.

The Columbia Journalism Review reported on this change on April 6: “AP now recommends that writers avoid using the word ‘prostitute’ when a child is involved, as in ‘child prostitute,’ ‘teenage prostitute,’ and so forth, because it implies that the child ‘is voluntarily trading sex for money,’ [AP Standards Editor Tom] Kent says, and a child, by definition, cannot do so.”

AP’s action came just months after the County of Los Angeles -- the largest in the country -- began the process of no longer arresting trafficked children, but instead getting them appropriate medical, mental health and social services.

We recognize the need to report on trafficked girls in a way that is clear and direct. But it is also crucial that reporting is accurate. The following terms provide accurate and precise language about children bought and sold for sex:

- Sex-trafficked child
- Sexually-exploited child
- Victim of child sex trafficking
- Child sex trafficking survivor

All of these terms evoke the elements of abuse and victimization that characterize the condition of children bought and sold for sex. The language here represents an important departure from “prostitute,” a term that can easily convey choice, agency, and criminality to the reader.

We stand ready to work with you and help you and your colleagues better understand this problem and explain the reasons why change is urgently needed. Indeed, the way you report on the Oakland case, since it has taken on national prominence, will affect the way society perceives this problem.

Background on Sex-Trafficked Children

All across the United States, American children are bought and sold for sex. Each year in this country, more than 1,000 victims of child sex trafficking are arrested and charged with prostitution. Many of these children experience torture and abuse at the hands of traffickers and buyers. Despite the fact that these children are too young to consent to any sexual activity, and the fact that federal law defines them as victims of human trafficking, they are not contemplated as victims. Instead, these children, many of them girls between the ages of 12 and 16, are arrested, prosecuted, and detained for prostitution when they are in fact, victims of crime.

If you have additional questions, please contact:

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Thank you for your interest.