

David Minthorn  
Stylebook Editor  
The Associated Press (AP)  
450 West 33rd St.  
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October 31, 2014

Dear Mr. Minthorn:

We, the undersigned, are leaders of frontline human rights organizations, survivors of the commercial sex trade, advocates, and allies working to end human trafficking and provide services to victims. This letter responds to both the public invitation from the Associated Press (AP) to submit comments for its Stylebook 2015 edition and the online campaign calling on the AP to replace the word “prostitute” with “sex worker.”

We strongly oppose the terms “sex work” and “sex worker” and urge the AP to use alternative vocabulary as proposed below. These terms were invented by the sex industry and its supporters in order to legitimize prostitution as a legal and acceptable form of work and conceal its harm to those exploited in the commercial sex trade.

Expert studies and testimony of survivors demonstrate that the commercial sex industry is predicated on dehumanization, degradation, and gender violence and causes life-long physical and psychological harm. Approximately 2 million children are exploited in the global sex trade and as many as 325,000 American youth are at risk for sexual exploitation. Between 65 and 96 percent of people in prostitution have been sexually assaulted as children; 60 to 75 percent have been raped by pimps and sex purchasers; and between 70 and 95 percent have been physically assaulted in prostitution. The vast majority suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. The average age of mortality of a person in prostitution is 34 years old.

The chasm between the meaning of the word “work” and the lived reality of the average prostituted or trafficked person is too vast to be ignored. The term “sex worker” wrongly suggests that the person in prostitution is the primary actor in the multi-billion dollar sex trade. This renders invisible and unaccountable its true beneficiaries - the traffickers, pimps, procurers, brothel and strip club owners, and the buyers of sex. These exploiters prey on vulnerable individuals marginalized by poverty, homelessness, racial and gender discrimination and histories of sexual abuse.

We also reject the term “prostitute” because it stigmatizes and conflates the person in prostitution with the criminal activity inflicted on her or him. Instead of “sex work,” we suggest “sex industry,” “sex trade,” or “prostitution.” In lieu of “sex worker” or “prostitute,” we recommend “person in prostitution” or “prostituted person” or “commercially sexually exploited person.” The terms “teen prostitute,” “teen prostitution,” and “child sex worker” have no place in responsible journalism.

Attached are the words of survivors addressing the harm of the terms “sex work,” “sex worker” and “prostitute.” These courageous individuals are leading a global movement to end

commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. We urge the AP to engage with these survivors as policy experts.

We commend the AP for its commitment to unbiased and independent reporting. You are a leader in the field of journalism. As such, you bear a responsibility to ensure that the language you use in reporting does not inadvertently contribute to misrepresentation and deny conditions of oppression.

We thank you for taking our concerns into consideration and invite you to meet with us to continue this dialogue about prostitution, trafficking and terminology. Please feel free to contact Lauren Hersh at Sanctuary for Families ([lhersh@sffny.org](mailto:lhersh@sffny.org); 212-349-6009, ext. 332) or Taina Bien-Aimé at the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women ([tbien-aime@catwinternational.org](mailto:tbien-aime@catwinternational.org); 212-643-9895) with any questions you may have. You may also contact the individuals below whose names are asterisked.

Sincerely,

SIGNATORIES BELOW

## **SELECTED QUOTES OF LEADERS FROM THE SURVIVORS' MOVEMENT ON THE TERM "SEX WORK" AND "SEX WORKER"**

"We reject the colonial terminology of 'sex work,' as it hides the racist, sexist, and classist realities of prostitution. 'Sex work' masks the violence that our sisters struggle against on a daily basis and repackages that violence as a form of freely chosen labour."

**Members of the Aboriginal Women's Action Network (AWAN), CANADA**

"There is no such thing as 'sex work.' It is really damaging to a survivor and all survivors worldwide to use this terminology. You are implying that there is something about it that is regular work. If you keep the harms and damage of prostitution right up front, what you come out with is that it's not a job. 'Sex work' has nothing to do with work. It has everything to do with harm."

**Autumn Burris, Founder and Director of Survivors for Solutions, California, USA**

"Prostitution is based on acute economic inequality: being driven to 'choose' prostitution because of poverty is force, coercion... This 'victimless crime' leaves a devastating impact on its victims ... There is a sexual war against women and children in this world. It has been going on for a long time. This war has managed to disguise itself as 'the oldest profession' when, in reality, it is the oldest oppression."

**Vednita Carter, Founder and Director, Breaking Free, Minnesota, USA (in *Sisterhood is Forever*)**

"I personally will never stop describing prostitution as prostitution, for the same reason I will never stop describing rape as rape. We have never, thankfully, gotten to the point in history where we started labelling rape victims with the name of the crime done to them, but we did that with prostitution, and we did it a long time ago. We will not reverse this by pretending prostitution is not prostitution; we will reverse it by insisting and demanding that women are not that which is done to them."

**Rachel Moran, author of "Paid For: My Journey Through Prostitution" and Founder of SPACE International, IRELAND**

"The term 'sex work' is offensive. The indignity and the abuse inflicted by the men who paid to violate me could never be considered 'work.' Prostitution was not a 'choice'; prostitution chose me."

**Bridget Perrier, SexTrade101, CANADA**

"The term 'sex work' is completely inaccurate... It is used to put a veil and disguise crimes against women, against women's lives. Because it is not work, it is not a choice you can make. It is not any kind of career. It is not a behavior. The term is a disguise they use to hide a crime." **Beatriz Elena Rodríguez Rengifo, ASOMUPCAR, COLOMBIA**

"Using the term 'sex work' justifies the sale of a person's body. It hides abuse by turning it into a 'job' while rationalizing the offenders' behavior. The phrase 'sex work' becomes yet another way to implicitly support a caste system that traps the prostituted, while defining a way to measure 'good girls' against them. This is systematically as disempowering as we can get."

**Beth Jacobs, Founder of Willow Way, USA**

"Our 177 sex trafficking/trade survivor members never referred to prostitution as 'sex work' while trapped in that 'life.' When reporters use 'sex work,' we feel like they're putting a stamp of approval on the terrible things we endured. The phrase masks the exploitation of the young, poor and vulnerable by the richer, older and more powerful. We know that the vast majority of people end up in prostitution because they have no other choices. The untruth that this abuse is 'work' only serves to stigmatize the sexually exploited and empowers their traffickers and abusers."

**Stella Marr, A Founder of Sex Trafficking Survivors United, USA**

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