

From Criminals to Survivors: Changing the Narrative of Child Sexual Exploitation

by [Journalism for Social Change](#)

May 5, 2016

Maheen Kaleem worked on hundreds of cases involving commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC) between 2008 and 2010 as a service provider in California’s Alameda County. During a telephone call with *The Chronicle of Social Change*, she recalled one conversation with a teenager who was referred to her while she was working with the Sexually Abused and Commercially Exploited Youth/Safe Place Alternative (SACEY/SPA) program.

“You made very brave choices to survive,” Kaleem said to one girl in an interview room just big enough to hold a desk and two chairs, “but there were also a lot of things that have led you to this point that were out of your control and that you shouldn’t have to take responsibility for.”

Kaleem, who’d been on the job just over a week, waited a few moments for her message to land. Two beats later, the girl looked up at her.



Maheen Kaleem, staff attorney for Rights 4 Girls. Photo: Rights 4 Girls

“You seem like a really nice lady and it’s really nice that you think that,” Kaleem recalls the girl saying, “but at the end of the day, the judge looks at me as a ho, my lawyer looks at me as a ho,

and the community looks at me as a ho and those are the people that have control over what happens to me.”

According to Kaleem, the girl was petite, bright eyed, maybe 5’1”, and around 100 lbs. She could have passed for anywhere between 12 and 15 years old. She was also in juvenile hall.

Kaleem met her while working as a first responder for SACEY/SPA. As a first responder, it was her responsibility to screen children for possible commercial sexual exploitation in Alameda County.

“Her ability to trust and engage in services was negatively impacted, because she had been consistently met with this response of being looked at as a ‘ho’,” Kaleem said.

Criminalizing Trauma Responses

Kaleem recalls another instance of working with a 16-year-old girl in 2008, who we will refer to as Jane. Jane was in and out of juvenile hall from age 12 to 16, on a special needs educational plan, and known to the child welfare system through several referrals.

“Despite being known to a multitude of public service agencies, Jane was trafficked, by someone she claimed was her uncle for five years, from age 11 to 16, to the same man every day,” Kaleem said.

One day, after the abuse had occurred, Jane waited for the 80-year-old buyer to fall asleep. The man had given her less money that day and had refused to pay the regular fee, but Jane knew she had to get the money or else she’d face backlash from her trafficker.

She stole the money.

The abuser eventually found out and alerted the authorities who arrested Jane and booked her on robbery charges. While in juvenile hall, Jane was referred to the SACEY/SPA program for screening.

That’s when Kaleem met her.

The events occurred in Oakland, California in 2008.

“What was especially egregious about this case was that they ended up demanding restitution,” Kaleem said. “They were holding her liable for abuse that her uncle and buyer were responsible for.”

Realizing that she could not help the Jane and other girls like her through the legal system with the limited knowledge she had, Kaleem decided to head to law school.

Kaleem is now a staff attorney at [Rights4Girls](#) and an Equal Justice Works Fellow.

Equal Justice Works is the largest post-graduate legal fellowship in the country, where law firms and corporations partner with the [Equal Justice Works Foundation](#) to place lawyers in non-profits to improve access to justice for those most in need. Fellows have two years to complete a project, and Kaleem is focused on addressing the intersections between domestic child sex trafficking and juvenile justice through policy, training, and technical assistance.

She was working with Rights4Girls when they launched their “No Such Thing Campaign”, in collaboration with survivor advocate Withelma “T” Ortiz Walker Pettigrew, that sought to end the use of the term “child prostitute” in the media.

Walker Pettigrew, a service provider alongside Kaleem and a founding advisory board member of Rights4Girls as well as an internationally recognized policy consultant and survivor advocate, states in the campaign video, “The term child prostitute made me feel as if I wasn’t worth saving.”

No Such Thing

Recently some battles have been won in the fight to end the stigma of commercially sexually exploited children as child prostitutes who should be punished. On April 4, 2016, Rights4Girls, in partnership with campaign founder Walker Pettigrew, [released a statement](#) announcing that the Associated Press had responded to their advocacy, and made changes to the AP Stylebook and would begin instructing writers to refrain from using the term “prostitute” when referring to child victims.

Los Angeles County has taken the message to heart and put in place a [first responder protocol for sexually trafficked youth](#), which details how county law enforcement will identify victims of sexual exploitation and work collaboratively with service providers to avoid arresting them, instead working to keep victims safe by providing them with the services they need to escape exploitation.

Despite this and the media win, California still allows children to be charged with prostitution.

“When the public system’s response is to punish them, even if we claim it is for their protection, it reinforces this idea of worthlessness, which impacts their ability to heal in the long term,” Kaleem said.

If children can be criminalized for the sexual abuse inflicted upon them by other people, the fear of being stigmatized and charged with a crime can prevent victims from receiving the proper services needed to escape exploitation, she added.

California State Senator Holy Mitchell (D-Los Angeles) proposed Senate Bill 1322 in January to combat such criminalization.

California children can still be charged with prostitution because [current California law](#) states that it is a crime to solicit or engage in an act of prostitution, but does not make a distinction based on age. If passed, SB 1322 would make the law inapplicable to children under 18 years of

age who engage in sexual acts in exchange for a commercial product, such as money, food or shelter.

SB 1322 passed the Senate Committee on Public Safety and was re-referred to the committee on appropriations on April 20, 2016.

Ending the use of the term “child prostitute” in the media is a victory, but advocates’ real goal is ensuring that no more child victims will be charged with prostitution, and instead will be offered appropriate services.

According to a letter of support for SB 1322, written by Yasmin Vafa, Executive Director of Rights4Girls, there are more than 14 other states in the U.S. that have passed legislation to end the criminalization of sexually exploited children.

To date California has taken a progressive stance in some CSEC policy, such as when lawmakers passed Senate Bill 855 in June 2014, which made clear that victims of child sex trafficking could be served by the child welfare system.

For Your Information

Jane’s case is indicative of the lack of information, screening tools and guidelines available to agencies that come across CSEC cases.

In 2012 the California Department of Justice released [The State of Human Trafficking in California](#), which is an assessment of how California was handling human trafficking from 2006 to 2011. The report made clear that California needs a central agency to coordinate and compile human trafficking information from local, state, and federal agencies and organizations.

California Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins (D-San Diego), who has introduced [other CSEC related bills](#), is hoping to gather statewide data through Assembly Bill 1731, so that California can better allocate their resources to human trafficking.

If passed, AB 1731 would create a Statewide Interagency Human Trafficking Task Force made up of representatives from law enforcement, social services, public health, education, and the courts.

Once the taskforce is created it will have three main objectives.

The first objective, according to the [bill summary](#), will be to gather statewide data on sex and labor traffickers, sex buyers, and human trafficking victims. The task force will also spend time compiling statistics on the prosecution of offenders and the services provided to victims.

The task force will then use the data collected to recommend a set of guidelines for training and outreach to anyone who may come into contact with human trafficking victims, such as law enforcement officials, service providers, educators and hotel workers.

The third objective will be focusing on increasing public awareness of human trafficking by evaluating current public awareness approaches and revamping them to reach a wider audience.

The bill passed out of the Public Safety Committee on March 1 and is currently in the Appropriations Committee.

It's About More Than Just the Exploitation

When discussing cases of sexual exploitation, most of the attention is on the victim and their current circumstance of engaging in sexual activity for money, shelter, food, etc., but Kaleem argues that not enough attention is paid to the trauma the victims may have experienced before the actual exploitation.

It is about more than just their present situation.

“It is a life time of abuse that came before [the sexual exploitation],” Kaleem said. “If we only focus on that one thing then we’re not actually addressing the root trauma that renders these girls vulnerable.”

In order to work with CSEC victims so that their past and current trauma can be addressed, more training will need to be made available, the stigma of being a child victim of sexual exploitation will need to be dispelled, and policies should prioritize the victim’s various needs to successfully recover.

SB 1322 and AB 1731 may not be the silver bullets service providers working with CSEC so desperately desire, but they are steps in the right direction towards establishing a base from which future policies can be implemented.

If you or someone you know is a victim of trafficking, please call the National Human

Trafficking Resource Center Hotline at 1 (888) 373-7888 FREE or Text “BeFree” to 233733.



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