

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and
International Organizations

Winning the Fight Against Human Trafficking: The Frederick Douglass
Reauthorization Act

Testimony of

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Thank you Chairman and Members of the Committee for the invitation to be here today. I am the co-founder and former Executive Director of the Human Rights Project for Girls, an organization that I founded to address gender-based violence. Although I presently am Google's Senior Counsel on Civil and Human Rights, I am pleased to appear before you today as a human rights lawyer who, for more than 15 years, has witnessed how children trafficked on American soil have too often been left behind.

A few years ago, there was a trafficked girl who tried to run away. She could no longer endure the sexual torture and injury done to her still-child's body. She could not tolerate the experience of everyday, serial rape by the men who purchased her. Because she could not take it any more, she ran. But her trafficker caught her. And to make an example of her, to scare the other girls under his control, he set her on fire.

This is not a story of child sex trafficking and enslavement that happened in some far away country. It is our story. It is the story of a trafficked girl here in the U.S. In Compton.

Girls are sold in this country with the same disregard for human dignity, and they are often tortured in the same ways when they try to escape.¹

Across the United States, there are child sex markets not terribly dissimilar to those in Cambodia, Thailand and India. Girls are abducted or lured by traffickers and, once in the commercial sex trade, they are routinely raped, beaten into submission, and sometimes even branded. Yes, they are branded like cattle. I have met girls whose faces were branded with the names of their traffickers.

The anti-trafficking activist Ruchira Gupta says that the girl who is bought and sold anywhere in the global slave trade is always the last girl. She is the child who has been left behind by her family and community. She is the child who has

¹ Tina Frundt, Essay: Enslaved in America: Sex Trafficking in the United States, available at: <http://www.womensfundingnetwork.org/enslaved-in-america-sex-trafficking-in-the-united-states/>

been denied love, support, education, safety, and economic stability. She is the orphan; the refugee; the discarded child of a war torn country.

In the U.S. the last girl is often the girl left behind by our foster care system. Most of the children bought and sold here for sex, are child welfare involved.²

The data is devastating:

- In California between 50 and 80 percent of commercially sexually exploited children in 2012 had been involved with the child welfare system.³
- The Administration on Children, Youth and Families, (ACYF), in a 2013 document, included several studies showing that 50 to more than 90 percent of children and youth victims of child sex trafficking had been involved with child welfare services.⁴
- In 2013, 60 percent of the child sex trafficking victims recovered as part of a FBI nationwide raid from over 70 cities were children from foster care or group homes.⁵

There are so many girls I have met whose lives painfully demonstrated the child welfare to trafficking pipeline. At a policy roundtable with 12 girls who were

² "Finding and Stopping Child Sex Trafficking." NPR, August 1, 2013. Available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=207901614> (2013 Operation Cross Country cites that 60% of victims recovered were from group homes or foster care system); In 2012, Connecticut reported 97% of identified victims of child sex trafficking were child welfare involved. Connecticut Department of Children and Families, *A Child Welfare Response to Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking* (2012). Available at http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/humantrafficking/pdf/response_to_domestic_minot_sex_trafficking.pdf; In 2012, California's Succeed Through Achievement and Resilience (STAR) Court Program reported that 80% of the commercially sexually exploited children in their program were child-welfare involved. California Child Welfare Council, *Ending the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: A Call for Multi System Collaboration in California*. Available at http://www.youthlaw.org/fileadmin/ncyl/youthlaw/publications/Ending-CSEC-A-Call-for-MultiSystem_Collabration-in-CA.pdf

³ California Against Slavery Research and Education, 2015: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/trafficking.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue-briefs/trafficking/>

⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Violent Crimes Against Children: Innocence Lost, available at: http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc_majorthefts/cac/innocencelost

trafficked and exploited, I listened as each one of them began their story of being trafficked, with the story of being in foster care. All of the girls experienced multiple placements in foster care and group homes. Most of them were sexually abused while in care. Some of the girls disclosed that they were willing to endure the sexual abuse so that they would not be removed to another home, and therefore removed from their siblings. Every one of the girls recognized that it was the experience of multiple placements in foster care and group homes that groomed them to be bought and sold for sex.

It makes sense that a young girl moving through several different homes and congregate care settings, abused in those placements, is vulnerable to a trafficker who tells her that she is beautiful, that she is loved, that he will be her father/boyfriend/prince charming and take care of her.

Withelma Ortiz Walker Pettigrew, the powerful advocate and survivor leader, said that her own experience of 14 different foster care placements was in fact her training ground for being trafficked. As she notes: "Like me, any youth in foster care, becomes accustomed to adapting to multiple moves from home to home which allows us to easily then adapt to when traffickers/pimps/exploiters move us multiple times, from hotel to hotel, city to city, and/or state to state. For myself, as unfortunate as it is to say, the most consistent relationship I ever had in care was with my pimp and his family."⁶

It must be understood that the child welfare pipeline is also a homeless to trafficking pipeline. We tell women to run from abuse, but when girls in care run from abuse, they often become homeless. They run to shelters or bus stops or loiter on the streets. And it is in those places of vulnerability that traffickers seduce, coerce or kidnap the girls. According to the National Center for Missing

⁶ Withelma "T" Ortiz Walker Pettigrew, Hearing on Protecting Vulnerable Children: Preventing Sex Trafficking of Youth in Foster Care, United States House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources October 23, 2013: [https://waysandmeans.house.gov/UploadedFiles/T Ortiz Walker Pettigrew Testimony HR102313.pdf](https://waysandmeans.house.gov/UploadedFiles/T%20Ortiz%20Walker%20Pettigrew%20Testimony%20HR102313.pdf)

and Exploited Children, 60 percent of runaways who are victims of sex trafficking had been in the custody of social services or in foster care.⁷

Indeed, homeless children who have run from home or from foster care, to protect themselves because they are LGBTQ youth, or abused youth--or both--are all at risk. 1 in 5 homeless children report being victims of child sex trafficking according to a recent study on the intersection between child homelessness and trafficking.⁸

We cannot continue to disregard the suffering of our children. We cannot continue to allow our children to be so hurt and so invisible, that a trafficker is their only hope. That is why the Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Act of 2017 is critical.

Especially critical is Section 114's emphasis on grants for housing and trauma-informed services. Safe housing disrupts the pathways to child sex trafficking. Safe housing gives exploited children an alternative to the trafficker. And, as the bill points out, this kind of safe housing for our exploited children and youth must be specialized and trauma-informed. The girls who have been subject to repeated rape and abuse need trauma informed care to heal from the injuries done to them. They have not only been subject to systematic rape, but they have also been rendered property. They require the supports to heal from that kind of violence and enslavement.

If we are to honor the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, if we are to hold ourselves responsible to the girls who are turned into sexual property, like the girl in Compton who tried to escape, then let us do the urgent work of creating new underground railroads out of this modern day form of slavery.

⁷ John Ryan, CEO National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), Hearing on Protecting Vulnerable Children: Preventing Sex Trafficking of Youth in Foster Care, United States House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources October 23, 2013:

https://waysandmeans.house.gov/UploadedFiles/T_Ortiz_Walker_Pettigrew_Testimony_HR102313.pdf

⁸ *Labor and Sex Trafficking Among Homeless Youth: A Ten City Study*, Loyola University's Modern Slavery Research Project, March 2017: <http://www.modernslaveryresearch.org/labor-sex-trafficking-among-homeless>