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Hearing on Oversight of Federal Efforts to Combat Human Trafficking  
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Members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to be here today to testify about the Oversight of Federal Efforts to Combat Human Trafficking. You have probably heard that human trafficking can happen to anyone. There is a lot of focus - in political debates, in the media - on sex trafficking. But there is also another form of trafficking - labor trafficking. In communities across the United States of America and throughout the world, tens of millions of people are exploited in forced labor. Labor trafficking is a heinous crime that inflicts lasting physical, psychological, emotional, and financial harm on its victims.

I am a survivor of labor trafficking and I am here today to speak to you about how the U.S. government can improve its response to labor trafficking and better support trafficking survivors.

### **My journey as a survivor of child labor trafficking**

It started with a dream about coming to America. I was 10. The image I had of the U.S. was from what I saw on television — “The Cosby Show,” “The Fresh Prince of Belair,” and “90210.” When I was told that I was going to come to the U.S. to be adopted and get a better education, I was excited. I thought I could marry Will Smith. No kidding.

What I didn’t know was that my uncle in Cameroon had actually sold me to a woman in Maryland. I became a modern-day slave not far from the U.S. Capitol. I cooked and cleaned. I cared for her children.

I would go days and weeks at a time without eating. Sometimes I would have to stand throughout the whole night. My trafficker would beat me until she was too tired to continue. She would call me “fat” and “ugly” and “dirty.” She said I was so dirty that I wasn’t allowed to sleep on a bed and had to sleep on the floor. I was never paid.

Every time I asked to go to school, my trafficker said I couldn’t go because I was too stupid. I was denied an education. It wasn’t until much later that I learned it was my right to go to school.

I ran away when I was 17. But even after I escaped, life was still difficult. Things did not miraculously get better overnight. I went into foster care. The journey of a survivor is lifelong. After I escaped, I went to school. I got my degree in Homeland Security from the University of Maryland University College. I now work at the Human Trafficking Legal Center. I had to fight to get to where I am today.

But it shouldn't have to be this hard for victims to rebuild their lives. There are many actions the U.S. government can take to support that journey, or even prevent forced labor from happening in the first place. I have concrete recommendations to share with you today.

### **Recommendations:**

- Improve the U.S. immigration process.  
I entered the country on the same passport and visa as four other children. My trafficker used the same passport to bring in five children over a period of years. I did not know I came to this country illegally, I was only a ten-year-old child. But the immigration officer who allowed us through should have caught this red flag.

- Provide trauma-informed, victim-centered investigations.  
After I escaped my trafficker, I met with federal investigators. I will never forget the moment that the investigating FBI agent accused me of telling a story because a green card to remain in the country. I was still a child. I did not know what a green card was. And I was very scared. I didn't understand what the agent meant. At that time, I did not know that I needed a green card to stay in the country or work. For that federal agent to keep insisting that I was telling a lie just to get papers terrified me and hurt my feelings.

While I was held in forced labor, my trafficker whipped me with an electrical cord, leaving scars. When the federal investigators wanted to document the abuse I had endured, they forced me to take my clothes off in a room full of people to take pictures. I was not comfortable with this. But I was told they needed to take pictures of my scars as evidence. This was the opposite of victim-informed, trauma-informed practice.

Thankfully, in my case, there were incredible female prosecutors who understood what happened to me was wrong. Not only did they investigate my case all the way back to Cameroon, they brought back pictures of my family – something I did not have during all the years I was in the United States.

- Improve foster care services.  
After I escaped, I went into foster care. But the conditions of foster care were very dire. I almost was recruited into sex trafficking. The neighborhood where I was placed had gangs, drugs, and violence. While I was in foster care, I began to understand the struggle children in foster care face on a daily basis. A lot of children in the system were being abused by their foster parents. I had to fight my way out of this system.
- Prosecute traffickers for forced labor.

Too often, traffickers are not held accountable for forced labor. In my case, my trafficker was arrested for Medicaid fraud. It was only after this case was completed that my case was prosecuted. The forced labor case was an afterthought.

- Prosecutors should request mandatory restitution and collect the restitution for survivors. Survivors need money when they exit their situation. Restitution is mandatory under federal law, but too often survivors never see money. After my trafficker was prosecuted for fraud, the U.S. government forfeited \$4.1 million dollars. The judge later ordered \$100,000 in restitution for my case. But all of the money was already forfeited to the U.S. government. No one made any effort to reroute that money to me. In the end, my pro bono lawyers helped me to get \$400 of that order. The U.S. Treasury has all of the remaining money.

- Make the safety of survivors a priority.

I was very disappointed when my trafficker was released from prison and I wasn't informed by federal officials. I had to learn about my trafficker's early release from the Cameroonian community. As a survivor leader, I lead a public life. But when I heard my trafficker was released, I feared for my life. For my son's life. This is why many victims don't want to share their experience – they don't know if they will be safe if they step forward. Survivors should be notified before the perpetrators are released, particularly in the case of early release.

- Provide trafficking survivors with legal representation.

Trafficking survivors need pro bono attorneys to walk them through the entire process of their case. There was one thing that went right in my case: I had an immigration lawyer who was an amazing advocate – and teacher. She taught me about my rights so that I could make informed decisions about what was best for me.

Too often, victims do not have their own lawyer to advocate for them when a criminal case is ongoing. We need lawyers to explain to us how the case is going to proceed, what our options are. To fight for us.

- Strengthen resources and services for foreign-born victims.

1. Increase representation of survivor voices from a diverse background.

Many foreign-born victims are unaware of the fact they are a victim. Especially for victims of color, they need to see more representation from the survivor community of people who look like them. They need to see people who have experienced forced labor. As a survivor leader who speaks publicly, I have had many victims come forward to disclose after hearing me speak. It wasn't until

they heard from someone that they could identify with that they understood their own situation.

2. Provide culturally-informed, culturally-competent support.  
Advocates need to have an understanding of cultural differences. It is hard for victims to explain their trauma due to cultural barriers. It was hard at first for me to share that I had been raped during my trafficking experience because that is taboo back in my home country, Cameroon.
  3. Fight for foreign-born victims as much as you fight for American citizens.  
I wish other countries would fight for victims the way America fights for its citizens. I say this because when America learned that trafficking was a big issue, they started to make services that benefit American citizens. All survivors – foreign-born and U.S. citizen – need services and benefits. Housing is one of the most important benefits needed. Homelessness is a risk factor for re-trafficking after victims escape.
  4. Provide Continued Presence and benefits to victims.  
Unless a victim wants to report to the authorities in order to qualify for a T-visa, a special visa that allows victims to remain in the country, there are very few other avenues for us to remain in the United States. And when a victim decides to go through the process to get a T-visa, they are not eligible to work while they wait for the visa. The waiting time can be as much as three years. Unless a victim receives Continued Presence – and very few do – it can be difficult to obtain benefits such as food stamps, housing, and more. Foreign-born victims are expected to live on air while they wait for their visas to be adjudicated. This puts them at great risk.
- Understand the role racism plays in human trafficking.  
Yes, trafficking can happen to anyone. But when people are vulnerable, they are more susceptible to trafficking. Marginalized communities – communities of color – are more likely to have these vulnerabilities because of systemic racism.

Racism also continues to play a role in the anti-trafficking movement. Last year, my colleagues and I at the Human Trafficking Legal Center developed a survey for the survivor community to learn more about how survivors were impacted by racism. Ninety-five percent of the survivors of color stated that racism impacted their ability to be a leader in the movement. Racism is present at all stages for survivors of color. Even after they escape their trafficking situations, they continue to face racism. In our survey, survivors of color reported that systemic racism made it more difficult for them to access

services, more difficult to obtain benefits, and more difficult to obtain housing. Fainess Lipenga, who works with me as the Training Advisor for the Human Trafficking Legal Center, and I co-authored an [op ed](#)<sup>1</sup> on the survey results documenting these troubling findings.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you for this opportunity to address the Subcommittee. It is an honor to appear before you today. I ask everyone here today who works on ending human trafficking to keep these recommendations in mind. Do not ignore labor trafficking cases. Prevention, protection and proper investigation are important when addressing all forms of trafficking. Forced labor must be on the agenda, alongside sex trafficking. And survivors' voices are essential in these policy discussions.

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Chumbow and Fainess Lipenga, RACISM AND THE ANTI-TRAFFICKING MOVEMENT: SURVEY RESULTS AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS, June 15, 2021 available at <https://humanityunited.org/racism-and-the-anti-trafficking-movement-survey-results-and-personal-reflections/>