



GLOBAL SURVIVOR NETWORK

Testimony of Vanessa Bautista, Global Survivor Network
Before the
House Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance

“Children are Not for Sale: Examining the Threat of Exploitation of Children in the U.S. and
Abroad”
September 13, 2023

Chairman Biggs, Ranking Member Jackson Lee, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify and for being present here today. My name is Vanessa. I am Asian American. I am Filipino. I am a survivor of child sexual abuse in the Philippines. Today, I am a human rights advocate and a founding member of the [Global Survivor Network](https://globalsurvivornetwork.org) (GSN) – an international group of survivors shaping and leading a movement to protect people from violence.¹

I wish to begin by thanking you on behalf of the GSN and especially our members from the [Philippines Survivor Network](https://globalsurvivornetwork.org) (PSN). You have given survivors of childhood sexual exploitation an opportunity to warn the world about this terrible crime and to share our recommendations for fighting it.

I was only 8 years old when the abuse started. It finally stopped when I found the courage to pick up the phone. Trembling, I dialed the number of my best friend at school. She answered. Through the tears, my hands shaking, I said, “I don’t want to be here anymore and I need help.”

I was put in a shelter home in the Philippines. There were so many others like me. Our stories were not the same, but the feelings of shame, the trauma, the crippling pain, and the decision to pick up the pieces and move on--that was the same. I became a part of a survivor group, healing together, advocating for protection together. Today, I don’t speak just for myself, I speak on behalf of my brothers and sisters in the PSN.

Last week, International Justice Mission and the University of Nottingham Rights Lab released an unprecedented [report](https://globalsurvivornetwork.org) on the trafficking of children for the production of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) in the Philippines. It revealed that 471,416 Filipino children were subjected to this crime last year – 1 in 100 children.

Joy² (a pseudonym to protect her identity) is one of my PSN survivor sisters. She was seven years old when the abuse started. She should have been going to school and playing with friends. Instead, she was taken into a room and abused in front of a camera every day for ten years. Her abuse was livestreamed to pedophiles around the world. Perpetrators logged onto their computers

¹ Learn more about the Global Survivor Network at <https://globalsurvivornetwork.org>.

² Joy is a pseudonym used to protect identity.

and forced her to do awful things in front of the camera. I share this because the threat of child sexual exploitation is real and the effects of trauma last long after the abuse is over.

This is how my friend [Ruby](#)³, who was trafficked as a 16 year old, describes it: “Even after I was rescued, I had suicidal thoughts and most of my suicide attempts happened in the aftercare shelter I was brought to. My mind was unstable. Staff there said that I had the loudest laughter during activities. But I would bang my head against the bathroom walls when I am alone, bang my head against my room walls during a quiet midnight while everyone is fast asleep. I would cover my whole face with a thick pillow and try to suffocate myself while crying.”

This is a very real, tangible, urgent problem that needs to be addressed. And I know, as a country, we may often be divided along partisan lines, but the one thing we can all agree on is, that children like Ruby and Joy need to be safe. We are here because we agree that children should not be bought and sold.

We are here because Congress, especially this committee, has the power to act on legislation that is ready for consideration. We have come together on this issue before. In 1996, Congress amended the Communications Decency Act and in 2008, Congress acted to pass the PROTECT Act, to keep children safe. However, crimes have continued to evolve since then, and our responses must evolve because we have a mandate to protect children.

Offenders in the U.S. should not be able to log online in the privacy of their own homes, and with a simple click of their mouse, violate the dignity of small children – my friends – in the Philippines.

What policymakers also need to understand is that while the Philippines is an epicenter of this crime against children, it is not a problem that Filipino authorities can solve alone. The government of the Philippines has exerted tremendous effort to investigate the trafficking of children to produce sexual exploitation material, bring victims to safety, and hold traffickers accountable under the law. But the scale of trafficking of children to produce CSAM overwhelms their best efforts. And that is because this crime is fueled and exponentially scaled by predators around the world. A global crime requires a global fight to end it.

We need to create and enforce strong regulations so that children are protected.

Today, as we discuss the necessity for this committee to consider proposed legislation that has already been introduced during this session of Congress, I want to implore you with 3 things:

1. **Survivor Representation:** I want to encourage us to keep survivor experiences at the forefront. I am pleased to know that a version of the EARN IT Act includes a provision that would require 4 members appointed to serve on a new National Commission on Online Child Sexual Exploitation to “be survivors of online child sexual exploitation or have current experience in providing services for victims of online child sexual exploitation in a non-governmental capacity.” I strongly recommend that this provision be included in the final version of the EARN IT Act and that people with lived experience of this crime should be included on this commission.

³ Ruby is a pseudonym used to protect identity. Her story was featured on a podcast produced by Cadence Media called “Finding Ruby”: <https://fightofmy.life>.



2. **Financial Restitution:** Survivors have been exploited for profit, and so it only makes sense that offenders must be held financially accountable. In April of this year, the Philippines Anti-money Laundering Commission released a study of suspicious transaction reports involving payments for online sexual abuse of children. The top four countries in terms of offenders paying for online CSAM were the U.S. (by far), the U.K., Australia, and Canada. This is urgent. These offenders have taken years from survivors' lives. They took 10 years from Joy. She must be compensated. We must build a system where survivors directly receive financial restitution to heal, recover and reclaim the lost years of their lives.

3. **Removal of Child Sexual Abuse Materials:** It is essential to remember that in this crime, an act of abuse is recorded and streamed digitally. Imagine the most vulnerable, painful, exploitative moments of your life are just one online search away. How can we expect survivors to carry on with their lives when their privacy is violated every day? In 2021, Apple promised child safety measures, and 2 years later, our survivor groups are [still petitioning](#) to remove images of abuse and protect children online. All CSAM should be prevented from being distributed online, and existing material has to be removed. Please hold tech companies accountable when they fail to keep children safe on their platforms and incentivize them to do better in the future.

Thank you for incorporating the voices of survivors into this hearing and I look forward to your questions.

