

**TESTIMONY FROM GINA CAVALLO, TRAFFICKING SURVIVOR  
TO THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND  
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS  
CHRISTOPHER SMITH (R-NJ), CHAIRMAN  
MAY 12, 2023**

Thank you for inviting me here today from New Jersey, to speak about my own lived experience, and as a subject matter expert on human trafficking.

It's so critical that survivors are heard and I'd like to commend you all for inviting me to the table, and listening to what I have to say.

I'm a New Jersey native, who is a survivor of domestic violence and childhood abuse. That experience as a child led me to a place where I felt ashamed, unloved and rejected. It also led me to being trafficked.

School was like an extension of my home – I struggled in school with learning and other disabilities – the only thing I succeeded at was being the funniest, because I used laughter to hide behind my pain.

It was very important for me to be accepted and loved, especially by my family. I wanted my family to be proud of me. That need was incredibly strong, but unfortunately, I was never able to attain their love or approval. That was my vulnerability and weakness. That vulnerability led me into the hands of the wrong people.

Force, fraud and coercion were all used by someone who pretended to be my friend, but ultimately abducted me into being trafficked. For nearly two years from the age of 18, I was prostituted, and sold to the highest bidder, and raped over and over again.

My identity was taken as I was given a new name. Sleep-deprivation, threats of violence, pornography, drugs and food were all used as punishment and reward, leading to my traffickers taking psychological control of me.

Does this sound like anything a young person dreams of for their future? Of having this kind of life? Being stripped and robbed of your mind and body, your humanity, your dignity and respect?

I became a commodity to be used for others' gain.

But I often blamed myself for my situation, because I believed it was my fault.

Because of the complex nature of this crime, traffickers frequently operate under the radar, and those being trafficked don't always identify as victims. Traffickers maintain power and control over their victims with physical and psychological control and substance abuse.

As a victim I was taught by my traffickers to distrust family and friends and especially law enforcement. The more they isolated me, the more fear I felt, and the more control they gained - which is very intentional. They instilled in me a strong distrust of the police – I was afraid of being arrested which in my case happened several times. In one case, I was raped by an officer and released back to my traffickers.

Had there been a National Hotline number at the time I would have had a safe place to call that wasn't law enforcement, who I feared. Thankfully today we have a National Hotline number which allows victims to feel safe and access services, because it's done in a trauma informed manner.

My traffickers moved around a lot, not necessarily to follow conventions or big events, but so that they wouldn't get caught. Because of my forced addictions, many times I wouldn't know where I was in the country or even when I was moved into Canada for a short time.

Traffickers are also women. In my case, while I thought I knew the people – in total over 2 years it was three men and one woman - who trafficked me, little did I know that they were using false identities. I've learned that this is quite common. Many traffickers are not who they say they are – making it difficult to find and prosecute them.

It took decades for me to identify that I was a victim of domestic violence, that I was a victim of childhood abuse, and a victim of human trafficking. I learned through counseling and my continuous healing journey that what happened to me wasn't my fault, and realized that I had been protecting those who had violated me.

As a victim I was left with a lifetime sentence: ruined relationships, addiction, hospital visits, suicide attempts, lack of jobs and education – and also left with shame and fear. And I learned that if you don't heal from what hurt you, you will be bleed on others who didn't cut you. In the years after escaping trafficking, the effects of being stripped of my humanity left me with trauma and mental health issues. I was also left with criminal records which created further mental anxiety.

We need to expose all buyers and sellers. They must be accountable. For that, we need to strengthen our laws, improve education at all levels, and name and shame the buyers and sellers.

I'm also hoping that all those who seek to end the exploitation and abuse of trafficking learn that they need to be a safe person and understand what that means. It's something we can all become. Someone who holds back judgement and instead offers food or a blanket and emotional support – treating all individuals with dignity & respect.

But what you especially can do as lawmakers is to ensure that in every aspect of your work to end trafficking you put forward measures mandating widespread survivor-informed and trauma-informed **training**. This has to become the norm and it's the only way to bring light to this inhumane crime, awareness to our communities, and to expose the criminals.

We need to create a safer country where people can come forward without stigma, to reveal their experiences. No one should feel the double victimization of being trafficked, as well as feeling that they have to stay silent because of shame, fear, and not feeling safe.

It wasn't until 2015 that I found my voice, truth and freedom. I am working to get the criminal records I was left with expunged and vacated – one down, one to go!

Today, when I go into countless schools throughout New Jersey, students are always engaged and eager to talk. As are their parents. Students and families always want me to come back. There are many young people in particular that need safe people to talk to about trafficking and other forms of abuse. It's essential that children are made aware of what trafficking looks like and get valuable information to empower them, and keep them safe, while ensuring that all information they receive is survivor and trauma informed.

This is a bridge of all voices – the survivors and the non-survivors – we need to continue to collaborate to make this work.

I couldn't do what I'm doing without the amazing leaders and advocates I walk alongside with each day. I am deeply grateful to my colleagues at the New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking, the New Jersey Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics Task Force and all those on the New Jersey Commission on Human Trafficking of which I'm honored to serve. I'm also incredibly grateful to Congressman Chris Smith who has led the fight against trafficking for so long, ensuring that there is funding and other provisions to protect, prosecute and educate our communities in a survivor-informed way.

That's why I'm so pleased to be here today. You are all making such a difference to help and support survivors. Human Trafficking comes in many forms and discriminates against no one. Countless women, men, boys and girls are trafficked every day and subjected to humiliation, shame, exploitation and abuse.

Although I'm no longer a victim – if what happened to me could make a difference to one person, it would have been worth it. I am encouraged today and I am filled with gratitude and hope because you are willing to hear me, and hear other survivors. It's essential that survivors be included in all aspects of the work to prevent trafficking, including education, law enforcement response, healthcare and so on. Survivors need to be at the table, engaged from the beginning to the end, and compensated in doing so.

Thank you for listening and thank you for all that you continue to do to end this horrendous crime.

Respectfully submitted,

*Gina Cavallo*  
*Trafficking Survivor*