



GLOBAL SURVIVOR NETWORK

Testimony of Josephine Aparo, Global Survivor Network
Before the
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations

“Efforts to Address Ritual Abuse and Sacrifice in Africa”
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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this important hearing on violence against children in Africa. Congressman Smith, I especially want to thank you for your longtime leadership in the United States Congress combating human trafficking. Thank you.

My name is Josephine Aparo. I am a Ugandan citizen. I am a survivor of violence and war. I am a social worker with International Justice Mission (IJM), which works globally to protect people in poverty from violence. I am also a Founding Member of the [Global Survivor Network](https://globalsurvivornetwork.org/) (GSN).¹ The GSN is an international group of survivors shaping and leading a movement to protect people from violence. With over 4,000 members in nine countries, the GSN is leading a movement to protect communities by empowering and mobilizing survivors of various forms of violence, including human trafficking, police abuse of power, violence against women and children and online sexual exploitation of children.

As a child in Northern Uganda during the 21-year civil war that devastated the country, I grew up hearing terrible stories of rebel soldiers combing through villages and abducting young children. The girls were taken to the rebel camps and sexually exploited. The boys were forced to become child soldiers. I lived in ever-present, constant fear.

One night when I was 11 years old, I was asleep next to my grandmother. I woke up to a loud, crashing sound. Someone was kicking down the door. I opened my eyes to the tip of a machine gun pointed at me. A rebel soldier stood over me. I was terrified, frozen in fear. The next few minutes seemed like it would never end. My grandmother pleaded with him not to take me. She quickly conjured up a lie: “This child carries a sickness. You don’t want her.” The soldier left without touching me. The next morning, I woke up to a desolate village without a child in sight. The soldiers had taken every boy and every girl. I was the only child left.

My grandmother and I had to move to a refugee camp to protect us from the rebels. I grew up as a child surrounded by violence. Women and their daughters were followed into the fields and raped. Rebel soldiers used machetes and rocks to kill people. I remember picking through bodies to identify my relatives. I remember seeing a woman with a smashed head. Her baby was still tied to her back.

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

My experience with this horrific violence was the reason I chose to become a social worker. No child should ever experience the violence I have lived through. Today, I work with child survivors of labor trafficking. Some of them lured away with the promise of a good job or the hope of going to school. Instead, they find themselves at the mercy of their traffickers – abused, exploited, with no one to turn to.

Today, I would like to expand our discussion beyond ritual abuse and sacrifice, focusing on the common theme of violence. I'll draw on the experience of my IJM colleagues across three countries in East and West Africa where IJM works to protect children from violence.

UGANDA

Girls across Uganda face a cycle of violence that follows them through every stage of their lives. This begins with the threat of genital mutilation pre-puberty, continues with the potential for early marriage as teenagers, the likelihood of violence within marriage and then the possibility of land and property being stolen if widowed. Meanwhile, the threat of sexual assault hangs over women and children of all ages. In Uganda, 35% of girls and 17% of boys experience sexual violence before their 18th birthday.² Among girls who experience sexual violence, 25% are assaulted prior to their 13th birthday – equating to roughly 1 million girls.³ Despite the urgent need, only 8% of girl victims and 5% of boy victims receive the support and services they need.⁴

Unchecked, this kind of violence has a disastrous impact on women's health and participation in society, social development of children, unity of families, social fabric of communities and the well-being of society as a whole. Fear of stigma, social pressure and lack of trust in justice service providers can prevent women and children from seeking protection from law enforcement, leaving violent men free to abuse until victims can trust the systems in their community to protect them.

IJM's teams in Uganda strengthen justice systems by working with police, courts and other local leaders to improve the institutional response to these crimes. IJM Uganda also works to train communities on their rights and how to report crimes, elevating the voices of survivors to advocate for change in the justice system.

KENYA

IJM's team in Kenya is partnering with authorities to combat sexual exploitation of children and police abuse of power.

In 2019, IJM Kenya conducted an assessment of child sex trafficking in the southern parts of the Kenyan coast, revealing that the region remains a major child sex trafficking hotspot. It is estimated there are up to 20,000 victims of child sex trafficking across Kenya, although only a fraction of cases are reported to the police.⁵ And when police do receive these reports, they are woefully under-resourced and under-trained to respond in a trauma-informed way.

² Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour & Social Development, "Uganda Violence Against Children: Findings From a National Survey 2015", August 2018.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Dalbery, 2019. 'GFEMS program scoping on sex trafficking in persons in Kenya and Uganda: Final Report - Aug 13, 2019.'



In November 2020, IJM Kenya launched a project in partnership with the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS) to strengthen the government’s law enforcement response to child sex trafficking cases on the southern coast of Kenya - encompassing Kilifi, Kwale and Mombasa counties. The project addresses gaps in reporting mechanisms and community-level response. It also provides psychosocial support to victims and survivors, including working through partner organizations to accompany survivors through the healing process.

GHANA

In Ghana, we partner with the government to address forced child labor. The State Department’s 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report graphically describes the nature of child trafficking on Lake Volta: “Traffickers exploit children as young as four in forced labor in Lake Volta’s fishing industry and use violence and limited access to food to control victims. Traffickers force boys to work in hazardous conditions, including deep diving, and girls work onshore preparing the fish for markets. Women and girls working in the fishing sector are vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation, including sex trafficking.”⁶ In research commissioned by IJM in 2022 that will be published later this year, respected researchers of the University of Massachusetts Lowell, the University of San Diego and Kantar Ghana found that 38% of children in communities around Lake Volta are suspected to be trafficked, with an additional 45% suspected to be engaged in exploitative child labor conditions.

As a social worker with IJM, I recently met John, a survivor of child trafficking who serves as the vice president of a newly launched Global Survivor Network (GSN) chapter in Ghana. Survivors of trafficking launched this chapter as a platform for healing and advocacy within their communities. John was very little when he was forcefully taken onto Lake Volta in Ghana – the world’s largest manmade lake. He was so young when he was trafficked, that he doesn’t even remember his parents. He was forced to work using his little fingers to untangle nets in deep water. Day after day, he was physically and verbally abused. He was starved and beaten. One day, he was asked to untangle a fishing net caught on tree stumps at the bottom of the lake. He dove into the water, struggling to untangle the net. It was too hard. Panicking, he rose to the surface of the water, desperate for air. Every time he came up for air, his boat master kept hitting him – over and over, until John’s head ripped open. Blood filled the water. John swam to the other side of the boat, desperate to avoid the blows raining down on him. Furious, the boat master ordered the boat back to shore. John was left in the water: naked, shivering, bleeding all night. He clung to a tree stump in the water, struggling to stay afloat. Finally, the next day, a passing fishing boat rescued him.

John’s story is horrific and, yet it is merely one example among many. Children who are trafficked, abused, and left to die – because they are disposable. This senseless violence needs to stop. As you sit here, and listen to me, you might feel almost powerless to act on a problem thousands of miles away. But I encourage you – children are children everywhere, and they deserve protection – beginning with a recognition of their suffering.

In my work with IJM Ghana, I see survivors of trafficking stepping up within their communities to create change. Survivors from the GSN are building awareness of the tactics used by traffickers who exploit children. Yet we need more investment to equip community members to combat this horrible violence and exploitation. With resources to educate communities, children are learning from survivor stories like John’s. I met a child who told me he recognized that he was on the cusp of being trafficked

⁶ U.S. State Department, 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report, Ghana: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/ghana>.



and refused to go with the man who promised his father that he would receive schooling. Instead, he ran away from home and sought help. We have a choice: We can either ignore it as a problem far away, or we can act so that a child's life is protected.

To truly take on this violence, we need the United States to continue to stand up as a leader in this fight. Toward that end, I offer the following recommendations:

1. **This committee has the power – and the responsibility – to move forward with a reauthorization of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. Notably, September 30, 2023, less than two weeks from the date of this hearing, will mark two years since the previous authorization of the international TVPA programs expired.** It is past time for this important legislation, which guides U.S. programming and policy to combat human trafficking globally, to be reauthorized. Survivors, NGOs, and governments worldwide look to the United States as a leader on this issue and the TVPRA is central to this fight.
2. **As Congress negotiates a 2024 appropriations bill, it is essential that funding is sustained or increased for programs that combat trafficking and other forms of violence abroad.** We can all agree that no child should be trafficked, abused, or violently exploited. U.S. government programs that support the efforts of partner governments to rescue victims, prosecute traffickers, and support survivors in their journey of healing should continue to receive robust funding. We recommend increased funding to further survivor engagement, including resources for capacity building and advocacy training to help develop civil society leaders to combat trafficking.
3. **Continue to prioritize the inclusion of survivor voice as a crucial strategy of U.S. anti-trafficking policymaking.** For Congress to be most effective in its legislative anti-trafficking efforts, individuals with lived experiences must be included in policy conversations. Congress should rigorously seek input from survivors, applying their key observations from lived experience as guiding criteria when designing policy. Additionally, IJM commends the excellent work of survivor leaders through the United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking, which was created by Congress in 2015. To bring even greater diversity to the collective voice of the Council, Congress should consider removing the requirement that Council members be a U.S. citizen or legal resident. We respectfully propose that this policy be expanded to allow survivor experts from around the globe to inform U.S. foreign assistance priorities and programs.
4. **Consider increased engagement and investment by the U.S. government to address commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Kenya, as well as the ongoing exploitation of children trapped in forced labor in West Africa:** IJM applauds the two State Department-funded Child Protection Compacts (CPC) which address child violence in Africa; the first compact, implemented in **Ghana** from 2015-2020, and the more recent compact, soon to be launched, in **Cote d'Ivoire**. These examples of U.S. government institutional investments are crucial for advancing crucially needed systems reforms in protecting children from the worst forms of exploitation and violence. More investment in anti-violence programming from the U.S. government is desperately needed in Africa, including in **Kenya**, a potentially excellent candidate for a future Child Protection Compact.



5. **Partnering with and investing in local governments:** Criminal justice systems can be unresponsive – and – even hostile to reports of violent crimes such as intimate partner violence (IPV) and child labor trafficking. Yet continued partnership between governments can significantly improve the performance of criminal justice systems for lasting change. While civil society and community members play an important role in child protection, the goal cannot and should not be for those actors to replace the crucial role of government officials and those institutions mandated to protect children in their communities. These include law enforcement, the judiciary, social welfare services and local leaders; all of whom need more trauma and technical training, and practical resourcing to be able to build trust with those citizens and create sustainable systems that are accessible and reliable for those in the communities they serve. Accordingly, this requires increased funding for criminal justice reforms including:
- a. **Training and mentoring justice officials** including police, prosecutors, and social workers.
 - b. **Reforms to bolster witness accompaniment**, to improve the process of “walking alongside” individual clients throughout the court process. (Lacking this, witnesses fall away and traffickers fail to be held accountable.)
 - c. **Mentoring and equipping local leaders, including civil society and survivors groups** to serve as advocates for change.

