

Jeanne Celestine Lakin

Chair of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council (ISTAC)/Manager of Disability Services and Founder of One Million Orphans

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

09-14-2023, “Children are not for Sale – Global Efforts to Address Child Trafficking.”

I testify before you here today as a proud American and as a survivor of child trafficking and a Rwandan genocide survivor. I am one of the lucky ones to have been given the chance of safety in United States, after witnessing the death of my family, lost my home, experienced the depth of inhumanity and suffered unimaginable violence. I call on all of you to ensure that children all across the world, especially those in places of conflict, are protected from human trafficking.

I come to you with true faith that you as the decision makers sitting in this room will do everything in your power to ensure that children like me are protected from human traffickers, not only here in our country, but around the globe especially in war torn countries. The bible in Psalm 82:3-4 tells us to “Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” I live by this bible verse and that is why founded One Million Orphans organization – will you join me in creating laws and implementing policies to protect children, children who are scarred by loss of their mothers and fathers, children that human trackers seek to make profit of their little bodies. I have learned that the first thing trafficked children lose is their faith in God, will you help to restore their faith again?

UNODC’s 2020 Global Report on Human Trafficking estimates that 65% of detected trafficked persons are women and girls and 92% of detected individuals trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation are women and girls. The data shows that women and children in armed conflict and people displaced by wars are vulnerable to human trafficking and this result in unaccompanied minors crossing borders seeking protection.

As the Chair of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council (ISTAC), I would like to bring the focus of the issue of child trafficking to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) region. According to the 2020 UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, approximately 40% of all global human trafficking cases occur within the OSCE region. Twenty-seven per cent of the cases are children, with girls representing 16% and boys 11%. While trafficking for labour and sexual exploitation are the predominant forms of trafficking, in the OSCE region over 10% of children are trafficked for the purposes of organ removal, forced begging, and forced criminality.

Children in institutions and alternative care, runaway youth, unaccompanied and separated children, children with disabilities, children belonging to national minorities, such as Roma and Sinti, stateless children, children in situations of armed conflict, children without birth registration, child asylum-seekers, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and children left behind by migrating parents have been identified as vulnerable to trafficking and other forms of exploitation.

I would like to also highlight the tragedy of forced deportations of Ukrainian children to Russia. As a mother, I couldn't fathom that I may never see my child again. Many of these children are indoctrinated against Ukraine, some have their documents changed and are adopted by Russians – to be never found again by their families.

Before I leave you with my story, I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate Congressman Smith for leading the way and uniting OSCE States on protecting Ukrainian women and children at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly meeting in Vancouver through the adoption of the Resolution on Adopting Effective Mechanisms to Safeguard Ukrainian Women and Children from Abuse, Exploitation and Human Trafficking. Your unwavering commitment and leadership in combatting human trafficking in US and as the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Special Representative on Human Trafficking Issues has had a significant global impact.

Now, my story is not a unique story, it is a story of so many children around the world. My story is the story of many refugee girls fleeing war and insecurity: a Ukrainian girl, an Afghan girl, a Tigrayan boy from Ethiopia, a little boy from Venezuela or a girl from Myanmar. I would like to take you on a journey with me back in time to Rwanda in 1994.

In 1994, Rwanda was plunged into darkness as a program of organized killing was set in motion by the extremist Hutu government. A propaganda machine and a vile ideology were employed to systematically dehumanize the Tutsi race. We, who were once part of the human family, were reduced to being labeled as "snakes," "cockroaches," and other pejorative names that stripped away our humanity. This tactic, as many historians here know, is a chilling strategy employed to enable gross human rights abuses and to incite others to join in perpetrating these heinous acts.

In Rwanda, militias were methodically mobilized and trained, and shockingly, 500,000 machetes were imported for the sole purpose of carrying out genocide. The deeply entrenched segregation even extended to our schools, poisoning the minds of young children from elementary to university level.

On April 6th, 1994, the borders of Rwanda were sealed, effectively trapping Tutsis within the country's borders with no escape. Then, on April 7th, 1994, the genocide came knocking on our doors, and my parents faced an agonizing choice. They divided us children into groups of three, and for some reason, I ended up with my three-year-old twin sisters. It was a desperate attempt to survive, and we hid in the unforgiving terrain of bushes and swamps.

During those harrowing months, I bore witness to unspeakable horrors. I watched as my father, a symbol of strength and love, brutally slaughtered with machetes and clubs in the street. I also saw the lifeless bodies of my mother and my three-week-old little brother. As the genocide drew to a close, in 100 days, over one million innocent women, men, and children had been senselessly slaughtered.

The United Nations estimates that between 250,000 and 500,000 women and girls were raped during this period. I, too, was not spared from the horrors of sexual violence. I was trafficked and nearly sold into forced marriage as a child. I share these deeply personal and painful experiences with you today not for pity, but to underscore a harsh reality. If you get a chance to read my memoir, *A voice in the Darkness*, you will realize that it was God who saved me and God who continues to empower me to do this advocacy work.

My testimony bears witness to the unimaginable horrors of the Rwandan Genocide against the Tutsis, but it also serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need for robust policies to protect children from the scourge of trafficking, particularly in times of conflict. In many war zones and conflicts, rape is used as a weapon of war, and sexual and labor trafficking becomes a chilling consequence.

We must prioritize policies that shield them from the clutches of trafficking and falling in the hands of smugglers. Children must be protected from the horrors of war and conflict, and survivors should receive unwavering support and resources to rebuild their shattered lives.

I encourage Congress to take decisive action, to implement policies that safeguard children from the horrors of trafficking, and to ensure their rights are upheld. Let us work together to make a better, safer world for all children, where no one endures the horrors that I and so many others have endured.

As a survivor leader myself, we also need to change the narrative about survivors of human trafficking and move beyond assumptions that suggest women and girls simply had “bad luck” in their lives. We need to move towards providing a comprehensive understanding of these diverse root causes, by openly addressing them from the perspective of those that have directly experienced them – like me.

With their support for ISTAC, the international community sends an important signal. Survivors of trafficking that are in silence due to stigma and fear are no longer faceless. Through the inclusion of survivors of human trafficking in its organisational structures, ISTAC provides a necessary and crucial voice of survivors to the global narrative on human trafficking. Through my inclusion at this hearing today, you have given a voice not just to me, but millions of survivors across the world.