

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
The Trafficking Victims Protection Act at 20: A Look Back – and a Look
Ahead
January 15, 2020 - 2:00 p.m.
2200 Rayburn HOB

Statement of Lori Cohen
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ECPAT-USA

Chairman Smith and members of this Commission:

On behalf of ECPAT-USA, thank you for inviting me to testify at this important celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. I'm honored to have been asked to speak about the progress made to protect children from sex trafficking and exploitation, and how Congress can work to eliminate these horrific crimes in the months and years ahead.

Before I begin, let me first thank you, Chairman Smith, for your courage. Twenty years ago, you recognized human trafficking as an insidious evil that was flourishing in plain sight. Because of your determination to expose

and abolish this abuse, you authored the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. As a result of your leadership, federal departments, including the Departments of State, Health and Human Services, Justice and Homeland Security are enforcing laws against this heinous crime. You have traveled the world, urging countries to adopt laws that prohibit human trafficking and you have been the strongest ally in Congress for abolitionist organizations like ECPAT-USA. The fact is, Mr. Chairman, countless lives have been saved because of your courage and the landmark law you penned.

As ECPAT-USA's Executive Director, I spend every day fighting to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Our talented staff partners with a wide range of stakeholders to develop programs and policies that safeguard kids. We do this through our Youth Against Child Trafficking ("Y-ACT") curriculum and Instagram campaign, which trains educators and students on healthy relationships and online safety, as well as the signs of exploitation and trafficking. We do this through ECPAT's Code of Conduct - a set of tools that the travel and tourism industries have adopted to prevent child trafficking. And we also do this through our work with Congress,

advocating for laws that protect our kids while holding exploiters accountable.

In addition to providing guidance on the reauthorization of the latest TVPA, signed into law one year ago, ECPAT-USA worked tirelessly for the 2018 passage of SESTA-FOSTA which, as you well know, clarified that websites could no longer knowingly facilitate sex trafficking through online advertising . Tragically, prior to the passage of SESTA-FOSTA, children who had been sold for sex through websites such as Backpage.com found they had no legal protections, as was movingly depicted in the documentary, “I Am Jane Doe.” The enactment of this law, which had near unanimous bipartisan support in Congress, removed the loophole protecting online predators, leading to the immediate closure of some websites and a significant drop in the demand for commercial sex.

That said, online predatory abuse will continue if Congress doesn't act.

While SESTA-FOSTA shattered the online behemoths that sold kids for sex, the Department of Justice needs more support so that it can vigorously go after smaller sites that have resurfaced, operating with apparent impunity.

Additionally, there are some who want to weaken the law or have it overturned altogether because of provisions that penalize the demand for sex. This can't happen.

Mr. Chairman, let me be clear - without strong enforcement of SESTA-FOSTA, and a renewed focus on ending demand, children will continue to suffer horrific abuse, the scars of which will never heal. SESTA-FOSTA exposed a terrifying reality - online sex trafficking is a billion dollar a year business, driven by the demand to purchase young, vulnerable bodies. We know that this demand has evolved to include related forms of sexual exploitation of children, including infants and toddlers. Recently, the Department of Justice held a summit that addressed the epidemic of Child Sexual Abuse Materials, also known as CSAM. In 2018, 45 million pieces of content (images, videos and chat) of children were reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Mr. Chairman, I'm mentioning this because laws like SESTA-FOSTA must be expanded to give the Justice Department the resources necessary to intercept these images.

Mr. Chairman, we've come a long way since you first authored the TVPA twenty years ago. As traffickers-which not only include pimps and brothel

owners, but also buyers-continue to evolve and expand their online presence, we must continue to ensure that the next reauthorization of the TVPA provides the necessary laws and funding to thwart anyone who would dare to sexually abuse our youngest citizens and the future of our nation.

Thank you again, I'm looking forward to your questions.