

**The Senate Finance Committee**

Hearing:

*Sex Trafficking and Exploitation in America: Child Welfare's  
Role in Prevention and Intervention*

Written Testimony for

**Asia Graves**

Maryland Program Coordinator & Survivor Advocate FAIR  
Girls

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## **Senate Finance Committee Hearing**

Asia Graves

Maryland Program Coordinator & Survivor Advocate , FAIR Girls

I would like to thank Chairman Baucus, Ranking Member Hatch and the Senate Finance Committee for giving me the chance to testify at today's hearing "Sex Trafficking and Exploitation in America: Child Welfare's Role in Prevention and Intervention." My name is Asia Graves, and I am the prevention education coordinator for FAIR Girls and a survivor of domestic minor sex trafficking in America. It is an honor to have this opportunity to speak to you about what human trafficking looks like here domestically, how trafficking interacts with the child welfare system and to make you understand that a girl who is involved in human trafficking is a victim in need of long-term compassionate services. She is not a prostitute or criminal. I would first like to start out by telling you my story of surviving sex trafficking. I believe that I am one of the lucky few because I received the care and support I needed to overcome my past. Then, I would like to share with you the work I do at FAIR Girls to find and empower hundreds of more girl survivors of sex trafficking right here in the nation's capital.

As a survivor of sex trafficking, I no longer consider myself to be a victim. While the average age of entry into sex trafficking in America is only 13 years old, my life as a victim of sex trafficking began at age 16. An age where I should have been going to school dances and slipping notes to my friends during class. Long before my exploitation began, I was already battling things no child should experience. I did not have a positive support system, my family could not care for me, and the teachers and social workers who met me did not see the warning signs. By the time my pimp sold me, I was isolated and scared, which is exactly what most girls feel as they fall victim.

At 16, I was living with my mother who was addicted to crack cocaine and herself a victim of years of abuse. I didn't know what else to do, so I moved in with my father who was an alcoholic. I did not know my life would turn upside down. My dad told me that I had to pay \$900 in rent each month or I'd be thrown out. How was I supposed to do that at age 16? I got a job working as many hours as I could, and I even missed school. When I could not pay his rent, my father throw me out.

So with no place to go I moved in with a group of girls who were staying in a one bedroom apartment. They tried to convince me to sell my body for sex to pay their rent. It was January 2004, and one of the biggest snow storms ever in Boston. But, I refused and started to walk in downtown Boston with nowhere to go and nowhere

to sleep.

As I walked, a guy who looked about my age pulled up in a car and offered to help me. He said I was too pretty to be out in the snow. I had nowhere to go, so I said yes. The thought of him taking care of me and having a place to live was like a dream to me. The first week was like being in a fairytale full of romance, good food, and a place to sleep. But, then things changed.

After a week he told me that he was a pimp and I was his property. When I told him I wanted to leave, he beat me for the first time. Then, he called an escort service who took naked pictures of me and put them on their website. Men came to the hotel and had sex with me. He told me he would kill me or let these men kill if I did not have sex. . Two weeks later he took me to the track, which is a place where pimps sell girls like me, and made me work all night – rain or snow, even if I was sick. He said that if I didn't then he would kill my family. He sold me to several other pimps that had sex with me and forced me to have sex with other men. My story is sad, but it's common. And, girls like me are all around, but people don't see them so they remain victims.

Three years passed. Pimp after pimp, beating after beating, and feeling like I'd never get free. And, feeling like maybe I was not worth this world. I didn't even feel I was worth a \$3 happy meal. After being beaten, hit in the head with an iron, and sexually assaulted with a hairbrush I had enough. And, I was pregnant. I wanted my baby. I wanted to have someone who would love me for me. I tried to run but was held hostage at gunpoint. When I finally escaped I spoke to the first officer that I could find. My traffickers took out their revenge on me. I thought I was safe staying with a friend, but the next morning my traffickers sent four women with steel-toed Timberland boots to assault me. They knew I was pregnant, and they kicked me all over my stomach and left me beaten on the sidewalk. I lost my baby, and I felt like garbage. I could have died, but something inside me said to fight. So, I walked to the nearest police station and a police woman named Sgt. Kelly O'Connell met me at the door. She knew my trafficker. During the interview, I started to miscarry and Sgt. O'Connell rushed me to the emergency room. Honestly, I feel blessed to have found Sgt. O'Connell and to have a group of investigators to believed in me and my story.

I did not wake up one morning and say that I wanted to be a prostitute. No girl does. And, there is no such thing as a "child prostitute" because legally children

cannot consent to be sold for sex. No girl chooses to be a slave. Yet, girls like me are the face of modern day slavery in America.

You might ask how this can be possible. Here is how. 80 to 90% of victims of trafficking have been sexually abused. That is my story, too. I was raped by my mother's drug dealers from the ages of 6 to 10 years old, which made me vulnerable to trafficking. I went to school and told my teachers as well as a school social worker who just believed that I was making it up. I stopped asking for help. My life as an American victim of modern day slavery could have been prevented.

Over the past five years, a strong team of women leaders, including Sgt. O'Connell, have helped me rebuild my life. They kept me safe. They stood by my side as I testified against six traffickers. I wish this had never happened to me. I wish no girl or boy was sold into sex trafficking. Yet, all this pain has led me to being able to truly empathize with each of the hundreds of girls who come to FAIR Girls every year. I hope someday to be a lawyer, and take my past and use my work at FAIR Girls to truly ensure fewer girls fall victim to sex trafficking.

I am going to be honest with you right now. The state child welfare system failed me as a child. How is it possible a straight A student like myself went missing and no one reported it? What about all those social workers and foster homes where I was abused and beaten?

To start, we need three critical changes. First, critical funding is needed to open specialized homes where girls sold into sex trafficking. Second, every social worker and teacher should be educated on how to see the red flags of trafficking and report and help a victim. Third, every high risk youth, most notably girls inside the child welfare system, need to be educated on how to stay safe from sex trafficking.

First, we need critical funding to open specialized homes where girls and boys sold into trafficking can truly receive the compassionate care they deserve. Often times at FAIR Girls, we have nowhere for these young girls to go. We do our best with our partners, but many times we are hiding in hotels while looking for safe house. This is not how a victim of slavery who has just been freed should spend her first night. FAIR Girls and many social service agencies nationwide have the staff and vision to create specialized safe houses, but we need the resources to launch and sustain them. And, I think you could help us make that happen.

Second, every social worker and teacher needs to be educated how to identify and assist child victims of sex trafficking. FAIR Girls is a member of the DC Anti Trafficking Task Force, and we have educated hundreds of law enforcement, social workers, and educators in victim identification. We can only truly keep American children safe if their adult support systems are educated and given the tools they need to understand the warning signs before a child is victimized. I often wonder what could have happened if one of my teachers or social workers had intervened and taken action to help me before I was sold by pimps all over America. This is not expensive training, but it's life saving.

Third, children, their teachers, and their social workers need to be educated nationwide on how to stay safe from sex trafficking. As the prevention education coordinator at FAIR Girls, I have educated 1000s of teen girls and boys in foster homes, schools, and detention facilities. This curriculum has educated over 4,000 teens nationwide. Children in the child welfare system are most at risk and absolutely have to be educated on how to avoid being sold into sex trafficking. Had someone like me come to my school when I was 16, maybe my story of exploitation would never have happened. Recently, one young teen mom recently came to me saying she was being pressured by her older "boyfriend" to strip because she needed the money. I was able to join up with her school teacher and child welfare advocate to stop her fall into sex trafficking. FAIR Girls has hundreds of stories just like hers. We work closely with the DC and Maryland child welfare agencies, and this evidence-based partnership model could be emulated nationwide with the right resources.

I appreciate the opportunity today to speak before you. And there are many more stories that I would like to share, as I believe passionately in the rights of the girl survivors that we serve at FAIR Girls. And I am very open to questions. I consider today the beginning of a wonderful dialogue that will lead to creating new resources to help girls just like me.