

**Statement by
Kubiiki P., Mother of a Child Sex Trafficking Victim on Backpage.com**

**Backpage.com's Knowing Facilitation of Online Sex Trafficking
January 10, 2017**

**Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
United States Senate**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and esteemed members of the Subcommittee.

In 2009 and 2010, when my daughter, M.A., was 14 years old, she was sexually trafficked on Backpage.com for many months. The Backpage ads of my daughter had nude and sexually explicit photographs of her. The ads were posted on Backpage to advertise my daughter for sex with adults.

Backpage was aware that explicit and pornographic photographs were on its website. They also knew that some escort ads on their site were for children, like my daughter, who were being trafficked. I know this because after my daughter was recovered, ads with her explicit photos continued to be re-posted on Backpage, causing her significant distress. I called Backpage numerous times and explained that I was the mother of the child pictured in these sexually explicit ads. I explained that my child had been horribly sexually, physically, and emotionally abused by being trafficked on Backpage through these ads. I begged Backpage to remove the explicit photos of my daughter. Eventually the ads were no longer posted, but Backpage did not remove them immediately after I called.

My daughter was trafficked on Backpage for months at a time. What she went through on a daily basis during that time is still unimaginable to me. It would be unimaginable to most of us in this room. Still, it wasn't until after she was recovered and brought back home to me, that I started to realize the full extent of the trauma she suffered and the impact her suffering from being trafficked on Backpage would have on my entire family.

In 2010, when my daughter was recovered, I was living in St. Louis with my other children. Suddenly we had M.A. back, but we found ourselves lost in a world without adequate coordinated support or professional resources to help us. At the time, there were no resources for child sex trafficking victims in the general area where I lived. I feel so fortunate that I was able to connect with smaller organizations from other parts of the country who supported me and my daughter. They were a lifeline to me during this time. But their resources were limited. I was able to benefit from their help only because I was lucky enough to find their services. I think of all the families who are not so lucky.

Even with the help I did receive, the pain our family suffered was immense. My other children did not know how to process what had happened to M.A. or how to help and support her. Our community did not understand the exploitation she had suffered. The news reports of the arrest and trial of my daughter's trafficker, further publicized the trauma.

This continuing trauma that was caused by my daughter's very public trafficking on Backpage kept her from having a path forward to heal when she came home to us. She turned inward instead, to silence and self-blame. I quickly realized that if my family was going to have a chance to heal together we needed to move to a new city and state where I could find resources for my daughter and more support for me as a mother to help my daughter and my children move forward.

We are still in the process of healing – even now 7 years later. But I am here today and still talking about our experience because it is so important for everyone to understand what we went through and to talk about what can be done to help children like my daughter.

First, there must be stronger laws to protect children against child exploitation. There is no other way to state this – the laws must be strengthened. If there are loopholes or if laws are outdated or misinterpreted, then these gaps must be fixed and they must be fixed now. No child should ever have to endure what my daughter went through. I say this because I know that even now 7 years later, children continue to be trafficked for sex on Backpage.

But we just don't need new laws. We also need more coordinated support for victims and their families at the federal, state and local level. This includes coordinated support from government agencies and private social service agencies. When my daughter was recovered, I couldn't easily find the right services to help her heal. I know these services would not have undone the trauma she suffered, but they would have helped her start a path to recovery that even now – as an adult – she struggles with on a daily basis.

We also need a more coordinated legal process among federal, state and local prosecutors when a child is trafficked. We need new laws and processes to make sure that children who are trafficked and exploited receive restitution from everyone who harms them. The limited process for court-ordered restitution that exists today doesn't work.

My daughter's trafficker has been in and out of jail. The court ordered her to pay restitution to my daughter, but she has paid nothing and there is no process to help me collect this restitution. As you know, when I tried to get restitution from Backpage for being involved and profiting from escort ads of my child, the courts rejected my case. Like the trafficker who was paid from the sale of my child's body, Backpage was allowed to pocket all the money from this crime, but my daughter has never received restitution for her victimization.

Another rarely discussed issue is the need for more social, psychological, and emotional support for exploited children and their families. My family was so isolated after this happened, and it was devastating socially and emotionally. The family of a child who has been trafficked and exploited needs a lot of help to manage their economic needs, family dynamics, and emotional functioning.

Today my daughter is back home with me. I cherish the ability to hold her and help her as she works through challenges towards a better future. But I still don't have any answers to explain why this happened to her or why everyone responsible for her trauma has not been held responsible. Meanwhile, I know children continue to go missing, are lured and run away, and too easily can become another escort ad on Backpage.

When I first started to talk about my family's experience, I was depressed and taken aback to find out how little the public knew about child exploitation. They didn't understand that child sex trafficking happens here and everywhere in this country. They didn't realize that every child can be vulnerable at one point or another. It scares me that children are not taught how vulnerable they are to this crime and what they can do to protect themselves.

We need real prevention and awareness programs on trafficking and exploitation. Anywhere that children and parents interact – including schools and churches and hospitals and community centers, and police and social service agencies – should disseminate prevention and awareness information. We need the public and children to understand that the crime of child sex trafficking happens. It can happen to children everywhere. And it is never a child's fault when they are forced into trafficking. Prevention and awareness would increase empathy in our communities and help children like my daughter and families like mine feel supported in their time of greatest need.

I would like to thank you for your time today and also thank you on my daughter's behalf. Having lived with this issue for the past 7 years, I can tell you that we still need real changes to help our children and to make sure no child is ever sold again on Backpage.

I hope you will continue your efforts.