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# Human trafficking survivor: 'We need jobs, not pity'

By Evelyn Chumbow, Special to CNN

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Trafficking survivor and activist Evelyn Chumbow.

## Story highlights

- Evelyn Chumbow was a victim of labor trafficking from ages nine through 18
- She argues that trafficking survivors need opportunities to thrive
- "It is not unusual for survivors to fall back into trafficking situations because they lack resources, language skills," she says

Evelyn Chumbow is an anti-trafficking survivor activist and member of the [U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking](#). She recently received a Bachelor of Science degree in Homeland Security from University of Maryland University College. The opinions expressed are solely those of the author.

(CNN)There are times when I feel like screaming, on behalf of all human trafficking survivors, "We need jobs, not pity!"

I was a victim of labor trafficking from ages nine through 18, sent from Cameroon to the United States, where I was forced into domestic servitude and abused. I've now been an advocate for 11 years -- long enough to know that my path to an educated, successful and productive life post-trauma is atypical at best.

We have just marked another National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month and it is gratifying to see how many people are aware that slavery exists around the world. It's time to

up the ante, though. While shocking stories of abuse and terror haunt us into caring about this issue, there is a persistent lack of understanding about what happens beyond a "happy ending" moment when someone escapes their trafficker.

While I don't want to diminish the need for addressing the issues that enable traffickers, we must also strive to empower victims who are desperately trying to make the overwhelming shift to survivor, as well as survivors who need and deserve to be recognized for more than his or her "story."

I'm hopeful that I can help further people's understanding in my new role. Last month, President Obama appointed me to the [U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking](#), which is tasked with reviewing and recommending policy and programs on human trafficking, reporting to senior administration and agency officials, and submitting a report to the President's [Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons](#). The council is comprised of a diverse group of survivor advocates, each with very different, though intertwined, priorities.

## **Surviving and thriving**

Mandated last year when the Survivors of Human Trafficking Empowerment Act passed, the council itself is a victory for the trafficking community, which has fought for many years to have a leadership role as the United States and its government work to understand and address policy gaps that allow human trafficking to exist, as well as those that prevent trafficking survivors from receiving the life-saving services and support they need to truly recover and thrive in the United States.

"Thrive" is such a key word for me.

I have faced many challenges as a survivor, including health and financial challenges, and overcoming the fact that I spent nine years with no access to any kind of education. Eventually, though, I also found amazing opportunities to travel and speak with policymakers and NGOs about human trafficking. While these experiences were personally rewarding, helped me develop as a leader, put me in contact with interesting people, and taught me useful skills, they usually did not help me pay the bills.



Related video: Helping trafficking survivors 03:38

I recently attained my bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland University College, supported by a scholarship from the ICE Foundation's Granting Courage Initiative. I also spoke at a conference, where I met members of the Baker & McKenzie law firm. Upon hearing my frustration at a lack of education and job opportunities for trafficking survivors, they offered me an internship. Personally and professionally, I have greatly benefited from this opportunity. I have gained so much, in fact, that the firm has been inspired to partner with the [Thomson Reuters Foundation](#) and the ICE Foundation to develop a pilot program that will provide survivor participants with comprehensive training, support, mentoring and professional development that will prepare them to embark upon successful professional careers and fulfill their potential.

### **Going beyond compassion**

Wouldn't it be wonderful if more private sector companies developed similar programs? I am thriving, yes, but so many others are not. It is not unusual for survivors to fall back into trafficking situations because they lack resources, language skills or education, and it is a struggle for many survivors to build successful careers.

Even trafficking survivors who become advocates, and are sought out to share their knowledge, expertise and experience, are often not compensated like other experts.

As hard as it is to be a survivor of human trafficking here in the United States, it can be even tougher in countries where the awareness and fight against human trafficking we are beginning to see here is not yet occurring. I often get calls from survivors in other countries hoping I can provide them with assistance, and it is my hope that we will soon be able to help them replicate successes like the advisory council and the careers pilot program.

Like anyone, trafficking survivors want to be recognized for their personal and professional contributions and accomplishment. Like any former victim will tell you, it's not enough to survive a terrible trauma, because no individual should be defined or pigeonholed by the worst thing that ever happened to them.

Should you feel compassion? Yes. Compassion is a great place to start, but it will count for so much more when channeled into an action that enables trafficking survivors to achieve what they're really after: purpose, competence and independence.

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