



A Survivor's Perspective

The Double Pandemic: COVID-19 and Racism

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About the author: An active member of the National Survivor Network since 2013, Ms. Lipenga is a Survivor Leader and Consultant for the Human Trafficking Legal Center. As a survivor of labor trafficking, she uses her voice and experience to educate the community and raise awareness. Ms. Lipenga is also a member of the Board of Directors for Survivor Alliance.



The world has turned upside down. I am a survivor of human trafficking. I – and so many other trafficking survivors – feel that we have been hit by two pandemics, not just one. The first is COVID-19. The second is racism. Both harm trafficking survivors in our community.

COVID-19 has forced all of us to remain inside our homes. I spent years locked inside my traffickers' home, held in forced labor. The isolation is familiar. So is the loneliness.

As a survivor-leader in the anti-trafficking movement, I stay in touch with other survivors around the country. They tell me that they are feeling anxious, depressed, re-traumatized, and unsafe. Some speak of feeling panic, fearing they cannot pay their bills. For those who are self-employed as consultants, the gig world is gone. For those with underlying medical conditions, catching COVID-19 could be a death sentence. For those who are essential workers, working from home is not an option.

Survivors are grieving. We are grieving all that we have lost. We are grieving for all that we built after we each escaped our traffickers: independence, financial security, stability, trust. These gains are in danger of slipping away. Our nation's leaders have undermined our safety, our lives, our livelihoods, and our health.

For support, we look to one another. We talk about what we miss. We talk about all that we used to take for granted. We promise that someday we will again comfort one another with a hug. Survivors' lives, just like everyone else's, will never be the same again.

Just as the world began to re-open, the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others revealed another pandemic: racism. It was always with us. Black people – including Black trafficking survivors – have lived with this all along. Racism has made Black trafficking survivors and other survivors of color feel invisible. It has exacerbated our isolation, increased our stress, and undermined our efforts to recover from trauma. I was trafficked to this country from Africa. I had to come to America to learn about racism. It has been a tough lesson. Survivors have known that the justice system is flawed: just ask the victims arrested and prosecuted for their traffickers' crimes.

This double pandemic has hit the trafficking survivor community hard. But survivors are resilient. We are building a new normal. We have allies. We are grateful to organizations like the Human Trafficking Legal Center that have worked to respond to the crisis. We are grateful for our communities. And, as leaders, we still have much to give.