

SABHNANI CASE: DOMESTIC SERVITUDE

RECRUITMENT OF VICTIM 1

Trafficker's mother recruits Victim 1, a 53 year-old rice vendor, to move to New York and work as a domestic servant for \$200/month.

BYSTANDER

An electrician performing work at the home observes Victim 1 dressed in rags and following Trafficker 2 carrying a food and beverage tray. He later testifies at the traffickers' criminal trial.

RECRUITMENT OF VICTIM 2

A second victim is recruited, a 47 year-old Indonesian woman who has a first-grade education. Once in the United States, the traffickers immediately confiscate her passport and travel documents.

ESCAPE

Victim 1 runs away from the home and seeks help.

2002

EXPLOITATION

Victim 1 travels to the United States. Traffickers (a married couple) promptly confiscate her passport and visa. The female trafficker subjects victim to a bizarre and sadistic pattern of abuse and torture. Victim is required to work in the home 20 hours a day for no pay.

2003

2004

2005

EXPLOITATION

Victim 2 joins Victim 1 at the family home and is equally exploited.

2006

BYSTANDERS

Victims reach out to the traffickers' business associate and the family gardener for food and supplies. Both bystanders testify in the traffickers' criminal trial.

2007

ARRESTS

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) finds Victim 2 hiding in a closet in the home. Traffickers are arrested.

A NEW YORK couple coerced two victims into working as domestic servants in their Long Island mansion. The victims received no pay and were subjected to severe physical and mental abuse.

Traffickers' Methods and Strategies

Recruitment

This case is a particularly appalling example of domestic servitude and forced labor involving prolonged, sadistic physical abuse, but it is also a virtual checklist of common elements and trafficking strategies. The traffickers were a married couple who used family connections to recruit the victims from their home country, and then used the victims' ignorance of the immigration process to control their documentation.

Exploitation

Once the victims were in the United States, Trafficker 1 employed a litany of common tactics to keep the victims from escaping: she confiscated their passports, threatened to abuse the legal process in both the United States and Indonesia, threatened the victims with serious bodily injury, beat them, tortured them, humiliated them, threatened their families with physical harm and legal recourse, gave their families false information, forbade the victims from leaving the house, prevented them from learning English, and required them to hide when outsiders entered the house.

Case Resolution

Trafficker 1 was found guilty of two counts of forced labor, two counts of harboring aliens, two counts of peonage, two counts of document servitude, and conspiracy to commit these offenses. She was sentenced to eleven years in prison and ordered to pay \$679,866.98 in restitution jointly and severally with Trafficker 2, who was sentenced to three and one-third years in prison.

Following the conviction, Victims 1 and 2 brought a civil suit alleging forced labor, trafficking, and RICO violations. They eventually settled for an undisclosed amount.

Opportunities for Intervention and Key Sources of Risk to Traffickers

The traffickers in this case went to great lengths keep their victims hidden from the outside world, but there were still several failed points of intervention. Both victims entered the United States with passports and work visas, though neither visa authorized them to work. The traffickers' family members kept the victims' documents in their possession while interacting with immigration officials, but these officials failed to notice that the victims did not control their own immigration documents.

The victims interacted with several visitors to the traffickers' home. Early on in Victim 1's captivity, an electrician doing work at the home spotted Victim 1 behaving subserviently towards Trafficker 2, but did not inquire as to her wellbeing. One of the traffickers' employees who worked out of the traffickers' home testified at trial that she once saw Victim 1 crawling up the basement stairs with blood dripping from

her forehead. On another occasion, the victims showed her their wounds and mimed the abuse. The employee bought them food, throwing away the food wrappers because Trafficker 1 had berated another employee for giving food to the previous maid. Over the course of two years, the employee helped the victims mail letters to their families back in Indonesia. She testified at trial that she did not report anything because she believed the victims would be punished again, and because she hoped that things would get better.

The family gardener saw Victim 2 several times. On one occasion, she walked out to the garden "raggedly dressed and looking nervous," and he gave her food and supplies on several occasions. One time, the gardener saw the victims struggling to move a heavy statue out of the house. He offered to help, but Trafficker 2 refused to allow him to assist them. The gardener, too, failed to go to the police.

Finally, though Trafficker 1 supervised the victims and was responsible for nearly all of the physical and emotional abuse, Trafficker 2 and the couples' four children were almost certainly aware of the extent of the mistreatment.

PEOPLE INVOLVED

- 2 Traffickers
- 2 Facilitators/Enablers
- 3 Bystanders
- 2 Victims

Conclusion

Sabhnani was a highly-publicized case that involved a notably small number of actors. By targeting women from her home country who did not speak English or have any knowledge of their rights, and by keeping the victims hidden and in fear for their lives and their families' lives, Trafficker 1 managed to largely eliminate any risk of having visitors or neighbors discover her victims. Those who did interact with the victims fairly regularly chose not to take steps to end the abuse. This allowed the traffickers to inflict particularly sadistic forms of torture on the victims with no interference. Victim 1 ultimately had to escape without outside help.

This case demonstrates the need for immigration authorities to take notice and make additional inquiries when individuals at U.S. ports of entry are not in control of their own travel documents. The court proceedings following the couples' arrest also showed the impact that intense media interest and sensationalism can have on the pace and the outcome of the legal process (in an attempt to argue that the large amount of publicity surrounding the case prevented them from receiving a fair trial, the couple attached 100 pages of news articles as exhibits to their Motion for Acquittal. These articles, from multiple publications, detailed the testimony on nearly every day of the trial). Yet the differentiating facts of this case—including the duration of the victims' captivity, the severity of the abuse, and the close and constant proximity of several onlookers—strongly illustrate the vital role that third-party bystanders play in detecting and reporting trafficking-related crimes. ■