



Modern Day Slavery

Northeastern researchers
explore human trafficking

By Bill Ibelle

Illustrations by Jacqui Oakley

WHEN RODERICK LEFT the Philippines to start a new life in Miami, he had no idea he was in the clutches of a sophisticated human-trafficking operation that would turn his existence into a living hell.

Like thousands of labor-trafficking victims brought to this country each year, Roderick, who asked that his last name not be used, entered the U.S. legally. He had a valid passport, a current work visa, and a well-paying job waiting for him. He thought he was doing everything right—work hard, live frugally, send money back to support the family. And once he paid off his debt to the employment agency, he would bring his wife and daughter to start a new life with him in the United States.

But within hours of setting foot on American soil, Roderick sensed that there was something dreadfully wrong.

He was transported to an isolated house in southern Florida and deposited in a squalid room overflowing with workers from other countries. From that day forward, he was forced to work 60-hour weeks for little pay while living under the constant threat of deportation, and fearing for both his own safety and that of his family back in the Philippines.

“We fell into a trap,” says Roderick. “I knew this wasn’t right and thought to myself, ‘I’m not going to survive here.’”

Roderick’s experience is far from unique, according to a groundbreaking study by a team of researchers led by Amy Farrell, associate professor of criminology at Northeastern. The study, funded by the U.S. Department of Justice and conducted in collaboration with the Washington-based Urban Institute, has been widely hailed as the most comprehensive study to date of labor trafficking in the United States. It earned national attention for its detailed investigation of how traffickers operate, the human torment they cause, and steps that can be taken at all levels of government to combat the problem.

Calling labor trafficking a form of “modern day slavery,” U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry responded to the report by convening a series of meetings with the heads of the nation’s top enforcement agencies and victim-protection groups to promote a coordinated national response to the issue.

It is a problem of massive proportion—a \$150 billion industry that ranks second only to drug trafficking as the largest criminal enterprise in the world. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 17,500 people are trafficked to this country each year.

Yet the Northeastern investigation showed that Americans, including law enforcement officials, are unaware that it is a significant problem in this country.

“Much of the general public will be surprised that it happens here at all,” says Farrell. “But what surprised me most during our investigation is that 71 percent of the victims were here



on legal visas. What shocked me again and again in the interviews is that these people are trying to play by the rules, and they thought the reward for that would be a green card. It’s part of what kept them in servitude—they didn’t want to do anything that would jeopardize their getting a green card and bringing their families over.”

Farrell cautions that the report findings may be skewed because those who come here illegally are less likely to surface once they escape. But even if the percentages are slightly off, two surprising trends emerged: First, a large percentage of labor-trafficking victims come here legally, and second, in terms of sheer numbers, labor trafficking is likely a much larger issue than sex trafficking.

“It’s everywhere,” says Farrell. “You might unknowingly encounter [victims] when you eat at a restaurant or stay at a hotel. You may see them taking care of a neighbor’s kids, your elderly parents, or working on your neighbor’s lawn. Much of this exploitation takes place in plain sight.”

NOT WHAT YOU THINK

71%

of human-trafficking victims came to the U.S. legally.

33%

of human-trafficking victims have been to college or technical school.

68%

of human-trafficking cases involve labor, not sex, trafficking, yet only 17% of the cases prosecuted are for labor trafficking.

\$6,150

is the average recruiting fee paid by labor-trafficking victims.

Recruitment

Roderick was working at a hotel in the Philippines when he was approached by the hotel's dentist, who said he knew of an agency that was recruiting workers for high-paying jobs in America. After meeting with the recruiters, he signed a contract that promised him at least 40 hours a week at \$7 an hour with overtime, as well as free meals, housing, and transportation.

It was an offer he couldn't refuse.

"My mother and father were having a hard time, and they asked me to come here so I could make more money," he says. "I had a wife and child, and I had to leave them behind."

It was a difficult decision, but Roderick took the long view. The recruiters told him that if he worked hard and made no trouble, the agency could turn his temporary work visa into a green card. It was a sacrifice he was more than willing to make.

"For most people, when they hear there is an opportunity to come to the U.S., it's something they can't ignore," says Farrell. "This is the land of opportunity—it's a chance to make a better life for themselves and their family."

So Roderick borrowed \$2,100 from a friend to help pay the recruiter's fee, and within days, he boarded a plane that took him halfway around the world to the Promised Land.

Or so he thought.

Roderick had no way of knowing that the recruitment agency was part of a complex pyramid of international recruiters, domestic placement companies, contractors, and subcontractors that insulates American employers from responsibility for the trafficking operation.

The federal case against the company that trafficked Roderick settled out of court. But most companies never come close to being prosecuted, because it's simply too hard to corroborate victim testimony or prove that a company had any knowledge of the operation.

Exploitation

For Roderick, the trap was set before he even left his country. As soon as he agreed to go into debt to pay the recruiter's fee, the recruiters had the upper hand.

The Northeastern team found that the average recruitment fee paid by trafficking victims is \$6,150. That's more than the average per capita annual income in the top six countries of origin for trafficking victims. In many cases, the victim's family members pay this fee by borrowing against their only asset—their home.

"The victim now owes a huge debt and fears that if they don't send money home, something bad will happen to their family—they will lose

NORTHEASTERN RESEARCH TEAM



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their house, or worse," says Farrell. "And the debt is more than a financial burden. In America, we are comfortable with debt, but in many other countries, even a small amount of debt is shameful."

But like most victims, Roderick found that the debt was only the beginning of his nightmare. When he arrived in America, he was whisked away to an isolated house 45 minutes outside Fort Lauderdale to work as a waiter at an exclusive country club. He was crammed into a tiny bedroom with two bunk beds and a fifth man sleeping on the floor in between. And he had it good by comparison.

"Some of the other men were living in a house that was so crowded they had to sleep in the garage," he says. According to a federal lawsuit against the company that recruited Roderick, the operation packed 40 men into one small house and 15 men into a single motel room.

The harsh conditions and remote locations were no accident, according to Farrell, who says that isolation, exhaustion, long hours, and fear are used by traffickers to make victims feel vulnerable and sap their energy to resist.

"Many labor-trafficking victims don't even know what city they're in," she says. "They don't know how to make an international call home and they can't speak the language to find out how. In farming cases, the workers are dropped off on a farm in the middle of nowhere. They have no idea where they are. They could walk

away, but they don't even know what direction to walk, and many don't speak English."

And that isn't all. In Farrell's study, 64 percent of the victims had their work papers seized by the traffickers, usually under the pretense that they were needed to obtain the promised green card. When the green card fails to materialize, victims start asking questions. That's when the threats begin.

While traffickers are known to use physical violence, intimidation and psychological abuse are more common forms of coercion. Some brag of "friends" in high places—connections in law enforcement, immigration, and the courts. They tell victims they can easily have their visas revoked, and some imply they have enforcers back in the home country who will harm their family if the victim causes trouble.

Sometimes, these alleged "connections" are real. In Roderick's case, the operation leader was married to a federal judge in Miami, according to the lawsuit.

"The victims know that once they are deported, U.S. law prevents them from ever coming back," says Farrell. "Their chance for the American Dream is over."

For hard-working dreamers like Roderick, the exploitation might be tolerable—it may even be considered worth the price of admission—if the fundamental promise of permanent residence were true. But it is not.

Roderick worked 60- to 80-hour weeks and planned to pay off his debt in a few months. But when his first paycheck arrived, more than a month late, it was minuscule. The traffickers deducted exorbitant amounts for the unsanitary housing and meager food that were supposed to be free. More deductions were made for transportation to work and myriad bogus government fees.

With a wave of dread, Roderick realized he was making less than half of what he had earned back in the Philippines.

"A \$2,000 debt is a big debt back home," he says. "There was no way I could support my family in the Philippines earning just \$500 a month in the U.S."

Escape

Roderick knew he had to get out of there. But where would he go? How would he find employment if his captors still had his work visa?

He spent two months planning his escape. Unlike many victims, he speaks and reads English. Although he was watched closely, he devised a way to sneak a few moments on the computer at work. He quickly snagged two phone



numbers—one for the U.S. Department of Labor and the other for a friend in New York.

Somehow, his captors got wind that somebody had called the feds.

“They held a meeting and told us they had connections in Immigration and in the Labor Department and that no one in those places would do anything for us,” he says. “They reminded us that our visas prevented us from working anywhere else, and that if we tried to leave, they would be able to track us. They said there would be someone right behind us all the time. When you don’t know anyone in the U.S., that is very intimidating.”

At least two elements of these threats were true. Temporary H-2B visas do require workers to stay with the employer listed on their visa. And, as Roderick would soon find out, there are ways to track escaped workers.

Roderick bolted anyway.

He called his friend up north, who found him a job working under the table at a donut shop in New York. A more typical scenario, according to Farrell, is that traffickers convince victims to keep working even after their temporary visas run out, based on promises that their green cards will arrive any day. But there is no green card, and they are now totally at the mercy of their captors.

Roderick had the foresight to get out before this occurred. But that didn’t mean he was in the clear. As soon as he left his employer, he was in the country illegally based on the terms of his H-2B visa. He couldn’t contact the authorities,

because he would be jailed or deported. He lived in constant fear.

“A few months after I came to New York, Immigration knocked on my door,” he recalls. “I don’t know how they found out where I lived, but it was clear that they really can track us. When Immigration knocks on your door, it is very frightening. I felt very unsafe.”

Free at last

Roderick’s story has a happy ending.

Because of the phone call he made back in Fort Lauderdale, the U.S. Department of Labor launched an investigation into the trafficking organization that had ensnared Roderick. So when someone blew the whistle on him and Immigration officers tracked him down in New York, he was able to convince them he was a trafficking victim rather than an illegal alien.

Rather than deport him, officials connected him to Safe Horizon, a New York-based victim services agency, which helped him extend his visa and resolve his family issues.

With that visa extension, Roderick found a legal job as a waiter in a Japanese restaurant. Over the next three years, he paid off his debt in the Philippines, and today he is earning \$8 an hour plus overtime as a nursing assistant in a New York hospital. Best of all, his wife and daughter have joined him in America and they now have a second child.

“It was very bad for a while,” he says. “I was in bad shape. But today I am emotionally better. Way better.” ■

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The groundbreaking study on human trafficking in the U.S. led by Amy Farrell, associate professor of criminology at Northeastern, in collaboration with the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Institute, offers these recommendations to overcome the problem.

Employer Accountability »

Adopt laws at the state level similar to California’s Transparency in Supply Chains Act, a 2012 law that requires employers to document steps they have taken to ensure their employees have not been trafficked.

Visa Reform »

Modify temporary work visas, which require workers to stay with the company listed on the visa. The report argues that the current visa system traps workers in abusive situations and recommends one of two modifications: allow temporary workers to change jobs after checking in with immigration officials, or increase inspections to spot workplace abuse.

Training »

Train security personnel such as visa officers and airport security to spot potential trafficking victims who are entering the country legally. Provide all temporary visa holders with brochures that inform them of what constitutes human trafficking.

Law Enforcement Training »

Educate professionals at all levels of law enforcement about the prevalence and warning signs of human trafficking. “The attitude has been that you are not trafficked unless you are locked down or chained in a corner,” one lawyer states in the report. Most police training to date has focused on sex trafficking.

Education »

Change public attitudes. “Historically, the American immigrant experience has been one of labor exploitation,” says Farrell. “Many people consider it a rite of passage. Immigrants have to earn their right to be here.” Public Resource Hotline: 1-888-373-7888

Interagency Cooperation »

Promote collaboration between the departments of Labor and Homeland Security. “They don’t work together and they do not get along,” says Farrell. “There are political and policy firewalls between the two agencies.”