

Baited, Abused, and Jailed: The Silent Plight of Human Trafficking Victims

Proskauer For Good Blog on **March 14, 2019**

Thousands of women in the United States, who never knowingly or intentionally entered the sex industry, find themselves trapped in a world of unspeakable abuse. These women, whether in illicit massage parlors or other abhorrent situations, are routinely arrested despite being the victims – while traffickers and buyers with actual culpability routinely are not.

To understand their plight, imagine you are a single parent with three children, recently unemployed, and faced with mounting debt. You see an online advertisement for a work opportunity in a neighboring country with a thriving restaurant industry. You can split rent with other workers, send home earnings, and return to your children as soon as your debts are repaid. To sweeten the offer, the employment agency covers airfare, handles immigration papers, secures an employer, and arranges housing, all at a fee that you can pay off over the course of your work engagement. It seems your prayers have been answered; you leave hopeful and determined for the United States.

Although this scenario may seem farfetched, sadly such solicitations have become a successful tool for traffickers to lure desperate and vulnerable immigrants into the U.S. Such traffickers target foreign nationals who come from economic hardship or violence, who are anxious to earn a living, and who would be entirely dependent on one contact once within the U.S.

Many women, like the victim my colleague, [Emily Kline](#), and I recently interviewed at the [Sanctuary for Families](#) Human Trafficking Intervention Court Clinic, do not intend to violate immigration laws, nor to sell sexual services. Rather, many intend short-term, lawful employment and are prepared to pay an agency or individual to secure all necessary documents. Upon arrival, these women are instead met by a “pimp” who exploits their immigration status and economic desperation, forcing them into servitude.

Such was the case with our client. Several months after being laid off, drowning in debt, she landed at JFK believing she would wait tables until she could afford to return home. Instead, she was abducted at the airport by a strange and gruff man who forced her to provide sexual services in the basement of a massage parlor that very night. His apartment would become her accommodations, her passport would be withheld until her “work” requirement was satisfied, and her earnings would depend on his whim. At the Queens Family Justice Center, between tears and tissue exchanges, she recounted instances of physical and sexual abuse by employer and clientele alike; she confessed alcohol abuse, thoughts of suicide, and a yearning for her children. And yet she – the victim – was the one arrested.

Illegal massage parlors generated [\\$2.5 billion](#) in 2017 alone, according to the non-profit group [Polaris](#). High-frequency customers contribute to this harrowing industry in disproportionate amounts: in 2018, [Demand Abolition reported](#) that approximately 25% of active buyers confessed to purchasing these women’s services weekly or monthly, and these active buyers accounted for nearly 75% of the entire market. Yet only 6% of customers who illegally purchased sex through human trafficking channels reported ever being arrested for the crime, according to the same [investigation](#). In contrast, 91% of trafficking survivors reported that they had been arrested over the course of their servitude, according to a [2016 study](#) conducted by the Coalition to Abolish Slavery & Trafficking’s [National Survivor Network](#).

Meaningful change must begin with compassion; we must remember the suffering behind the human trafficking trade. We must stand in the shoes of the women who are brought here under false pretenses and coercion. We must advocate for policing and prosecuting the buyers and traffickers instead of the victims; for educating the public on the realities of sex trafficking so that we can deter purchasers from preying on the vulnerable; and for providing victims with greater services and support so that they may escape an otherwise gruesome fate.

We are honored to partner with [Sanctuary for Families](#), which transforms lives by helping victims of gender violence.

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