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SLAVERY IN AMERICA

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JEFFREY KAYE: Berkeley, California: Last January, the city's wealthiest landlord was arrested and charged with buying two teenage girls in India and bringing them to the United States for forced labor.

Anchorage, Alaska: Immigration authorities are currently investigating claims by Russian dancers that they were tricked into coming to the U.S. And forced to perform in a local strip club.

Las Vegas, Nevada: In September, authorities arrested the alleged leaders of an Asian organized crime ring, charging them with bringing Chinese women to work in brothels from New York to Los Angeles.



To federal law enforcement officials and human rights activists, these incidents prove that slavery is once again alive and thriving in America. Michael Gennaco heads the civil rights section of the U.S. Attorney's Office in Los Angeles.

MICHAEL GENNACO: What we are experiencing in this country is a modern form of slavery. In many ways it parallels the same experience that... that the victims felt in the antebellum days of the South. The people that are brought here are essentially not brought in chains, but they're brought accompanied by traffickers. They're made sure that as soon as they arrive at the point of destination, that they're whisked away to an unfamiliar situation in the same way that the slaves in the South were whisked away to the slave master or the slave trader to an unfamiliar location. And then, once the slaves are acculturated and the master starts feeling comfortable about their ability to be trusted and not to run away, that they were then released from their chains.



JEFFREY KAYE: As many as 50,000 people are illicitly trafficked into the United States annually, according to a 1999 CIA study. Once here, they're forced to work as prostitutes, sweatshop laborers, farmhands, and servants in private homes. The United Nations reports that as many as two million people are trapped in the global slave trade. Victims-- mostly women-- are often desperate to escape poverty and abuse in countries wracked by economic turmoil.



That was the case with Thonglim Khampiranon, a 43-year-old mother of two from rural Thailand, now living in Los Angeles. Seeking to provide a better life for her family, in 1991, Khampiranon was one of three Thai women trafficked to Los Angeles to work for this woman, Supawan Veerapol, a pillar of the Thai community. Khampiranon says Veerapol promised the women decent treatment and \$240 a month working in her suburban home and in her restaurant located in a shopping mall. But instead, Khampiranon says she and the other women received six years of exploitation and abuse, working as slaves. Khampiranon often worked 18 hours a day, seven days a week. And in the six months prior to her escape, she received no pay.

A slave's story

THONGLIM KAMPIRANON: (Translated) I would wake up about 6:00 or 7:00 in the morning and start cleaning the house. Around 10:00, Supewon would then take me to the restaurant. I'd work there until about midnight. When I got back home, I could only have a few hours sleep and then I had to wake up and start cleaning the house again the next morning.



JEFFREY KAYE: Khampiranon says Veerapol controlled her and the other Thai women by confiscating their passports, censoring their mail and restricting contact with the outside world.



THONGLIM KAMPIRANON: (Translated) She didn't allow me to see other Thai people. She told me they were bad. And because I was here illegally, I shouldn't see other people.

JEFFREY KAYE: Veerapol also used the names of the Thai women to establish fraudulent credit histories with which she purchased a Mercedes Benz and a new home. To maintain obedience, Khampiranon says Supewon Veerapol threatened family members in Thailand.

THONGLIM KAMPIRANON: (Translated) Supewon told me that killing someone in Thailand would only cost \$120. Supewon said she could hire a killer.

JEFFREY KAYE: And you took that as a death threat against your family.

THONGLIM KAMPIRANON: (Translated) Yes. Yes.



JEFFREY KAYE: In late 1999, Veerapol was convicted of fraud, harboring illegal aliens and one of three counts of involuntary servitude. That count involved a worker-- not Khampiranon-- whom Veerapol had struck. Veerapol is now serving an eight-year prison sentence. She says she is innocent of all charges, and in a written statement to the *NewsHour* said the women in her house were always free to leave. "If you are interested in interviewing someone who kept people as slaves, then you are covering the wrong story. I traveled abroad two to three times yearly, and the ladies held the keys to house, business, and family Mercedes."

Slavery: Alive and thriving

JENNIFER STANGER: Well, I think the Veerapol case is really a classic case of trafficking.



JEFFREY KAYE: Jennifer Stanger is co-founder of the Los Angeles-based Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking, an organization which aids victims of the modern-day slave trade. She says to maintain control, traffickers prey on their victims' vulnerability.

JENNIFER STANGER: They don't speak English. They have very low educational levels, low job skills. They know that they're illegal, and their fears of the police and Immigration are very real. They've been told that, you know, the police will, you know, rape you, or do something horrible to you. And in their home countries, that's probably true. So their whole frame of reference is completely different. And their world view is their world view from their home country.

JEFFREY KAYE: The odyssey of Khampiranon and the women who worked for Veerapol ended when a Veerapol acquaintance tipped off authorities. In Southern California, the women's experience is not isolated. LA, with its immigrant communities and commercial links to Asia and Latin America, is a crossroads of the international slave trade. It's also the place where slavery leapt from the history page to the front page when in 1995 some 70 Thai sweatshop workers were discovered toiling in prison-like captivity in the suburb of El Monte.

MICHAEL GENNACO: The garment manufacturers and the defendants in that case were able to amass millions of dollars in profits as a result of keeping that forced labor in this country.

JEFFREY KAYE: The El Monte sweatshop case highlighted the connections between human bondage and profits; a connection most clearly seen in the global sex industry. It's a multibillion-dollar business whose human merchandise increasingly comes from Russia and Eastern Europe. In video shot by a human rights group, Russian prostitutes working in Western Europe talked about the traffickers' ruthlessness.

WOMAN: (Translated) The pimps don't give a damn at all. Nothing concerns them. They have one goal - to get the money. If I don't pay them back, they'll sell me. Then I won't get to see Russia for another 10 years.

JEFFREY KAYE: In Southern California, trafficking of women for sex is often controlled by Asian organized crime rings. They advertise not so subtly in local ethnic newspapers and turn suburban apartments into brothels.



JEFFREY KAYE: Is this a profitable business?

DET. KEITH BACON: Extremely profitable.

JEFFREY KAYE: Keith Bacon is a detective with the organized crime unit in Monterey Park, a middle class Chinese-American community where several prostitution rings have been busted.

DET. KEITH BACON: Say you've got a house with five girls. Say you're charging \$100. Each girl does five to ten liaisons a day. That adds up. What's your overhead? You have to feed the girl, you have the rent of the house; essentials, household essentials. There's not much overhead. It's a lot of profit, an extremely high amount of profit.

JEFFREY KAYE: As in the case of Kevin Dong, accused of operating a prostitution ring with women brought from Asia. In just one six-month period, Dong made over \$460,000 operating brothels in these suburban homes and apartments, according to federal authorities. Frequently prostitutes have to work off huge debts to their traffickers. In undercover video shot last year by U.S. Immigration agents in Thailand, a woman talked about the payments she'd have to make.

MAN: Can I ask you how much you're going to pay? Can I ask you that? Like \$40,000?

WOMAN: \$40,000.

MAN: Is it 40 exactly?

WOMAN: Yes.

MAN: Oh, really? That's a lot of money, isn't it?

WOMAN: Yeah.

DET. KEITH BACON: If we're talking \$30,000, \$40,000, they're given the explanation that you have to stay with us and service 300 clients at maybe \$100 to \$120 a client to pay off your debt to us before moving on.

Finding freedom



JEFFREY KAYE: Anti-slavery activist Stanger says with few services available to help victims of trafficking, their ordeals don't necessarily end with freedom.

JENNIFER STANGER: The people who kind of fall through the cracks in our federal system may be deported right back into the hands of their traffickers. When they're deported, sent back home, who picks them up? The trafficker, and then puts them in debt again.

JEFFREY KAYE: To educate women about trafficking, several countries have launched public awareness campaigns. They range from commercials shown on Ukrainian television to stage plays performed in the rural Philippines.

MAN: (Speaking native language)

JEFFREY KAYE: In the United States, landmark legislation passed last year will stiffen penalties against traffickers and make it easier for victims to stay in this country and receive help.

JENNIFER STANGER: If you've been in servitude for five years, seven years, it can take maybe ten years to really get your life back together, especially when you don't have legal status.

THONGLIM KHAMPIRANON: Hi. My birthday is today.

JEFFREY KAYE: It's a process Thonglim Khampiranon has started. She now has a new job and new friends in LA's Thai community.

JENNIFER STANGER: The people who have been trafficked, they're relatively normal folks that wound up in a very abnormal situation and we're able to really see how resilient they are after they are freed and they get to rebuild their lives.



THONGLIM KHAMPIRANON: Everywhere I want to go, I go. I want to... I work. I have joy now. Freedom, right? (Laughs) Yes.

JEFFREY KAYE: But while Khampiranon celebrates her freedom, much work remains. In Los Angeles, federal prosecutors have established a first of its kind worker exploitation taskforce. Activists worry that inequities in the global economy combined with the ease of international travel ensure a continuing stream of victims for the modern day slave trade.