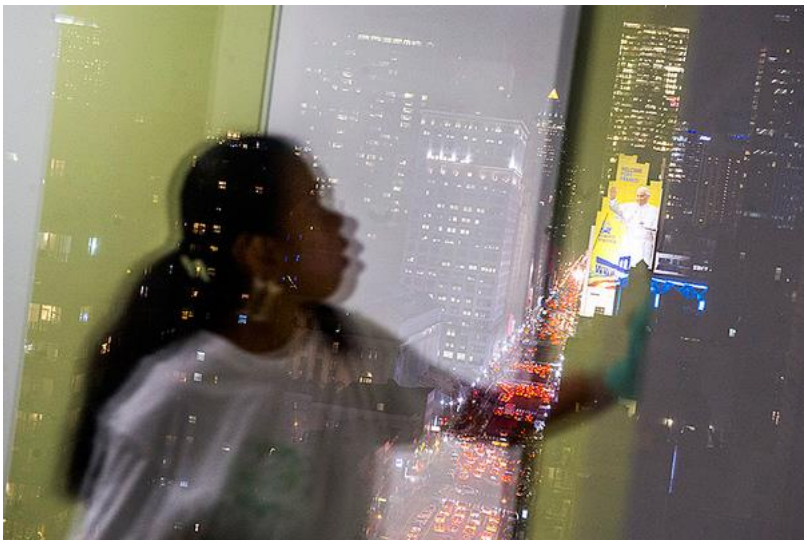
Trafficking: One woman's journey from Staten Island slavery to her own boss

Human trafficking victims in New York have banded together to help others and build new lives. Part 2 of a series on solutions to freeing victims of labor trafficking around the globe.

By Stacy Teicher Khadaroo, Staff writer November 2, 2015

- 

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New York — ***This story was written to be viewed on the Monitor's long-form platform. Click here to view that version.***

In 2014, Christmas came early for Jing. The Filipina domestic worker had been virtually trapped in a Staten Island home for more than a year.

While her employers were out on Dec. 17, two federal agents came to the door and said they were there to help.

A series on human trafficking:How to free Modern Slaves

They asked why she was bruised, and she told them about the abuse she suffered at the hands of the wife of the wealthy Egyptian businessman who had hired her in Qatar 14 months before.

The woman had begun physically abusing her after giving birth to her seventh child, says Jing, who is using a pseudonym.

She wasn't allowed to leave the house and backyard. She had no days off. Her employers kept her passport and paid her the equivalent of about $240 a month – less than $10 a day and only half of what they had promised. She had no privacy – sharing a room with the 2-year-old.

"They were always saying if I go outside there will be police and they will arrest you.... So I got scared," Jing says. She had no idea the laws in the US would be on her side.

To this day, Jing says, she isn't sure how the agents found her. They connected her by phone to a Filipina woman, who told Jing in her native Tagalog that she could get help and leave that day if she chose.

"At first I was thinking twice about it because I didn't know if I should trust the police," Jing says. But "I felt like,... it's a Filipino community, so it's going to help me."

The "Filipino community" she placed her faith in turned out to be Damayan Migrant Workers Association, a grass-roots group in New York that has been assisting Filipino domestic workers and trafficking victims since 2002.

Members of a migrant workers association participate in a walk-a-thon fundraising event for the Damayan Cleaning Cooperative on Sept. 27, 2015, in New York. Ann Hermes/Staff

In many ways, Damayan's work is a model for how a cycle of victimization can be not only interrupted, but also transformed: Jing and other survivors of domestic servitude are gaining confidence and stability. In turn, they are becoming part of the solution to labor trafficking – a crime that many Americans don't even realize may be hidden in kitchens and baby nurseries in their own neighbors' homes.

Former victims become advocates for others, demanding changes to structures that have allowed the trafficking of domestic workers to flourish.

They have pressured embassies when diplomatic immunity was shielding traffickers from prosecution, and have helped some women win financial settlements. Damayan's members played a key role in New York becoming the first of several states to pass a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. They have educated young Filipinos about how the Philippines government pushes workers to go abroad to prop up the economy with remittances.

“The way that they really pull together the legal advocacy, the organizing, the co-op, and the political education…, that’s how you create social change,” says Grace Chang, an author on trafficking and domestic workers and a professor at the University of California in Santa Barbara. Organizations like Damayan “are a great example of how you come up against these behemoth government systems and you make a difference slowly, generation by generation.”

Much of the work is indeed slow – helping one woman at a time reclaim her life. But each time “there is some justice … and they are able to have a life free of this gross exploitation,... it means something. It’s setting precedent for the future,” Professor Chang says.

For victims of human trafficking like Jing, escape is just the first step. They often need shelter, legal aid, counseling, and other services from an array of groups with which Damayan partners.

[Click here to read about the dramatic rescue of two Nepali relatives trapped in the same home in the United States.]

Around the country, a handful of such organizations are working to connect with isolated domestic servants to show them that help is available.

Casa de Maryland’s workers in Maryland and Virginia hand out know-your-rights cards to nannies they see in parks and churches. The Coalition to Abolish Slavery & Trafficking (CAST) in Los Angeles runs a trafficking hotline and one of the few shelters in the US specifically for trafficking victims. In the Queens borough of New York, Adhikaar serves Nepali-speakers and Tibetans.

These groups are sticking with trafficking survivors for months or years as they recover a sense of dignity and start to take control of their future. Damayan’s latest project: a worker-owned cleaning co-operative that will enable more women like Jing to control their own job conditions.

When employment crosses the line

An estimated 2 million people work as nannies, cooks, cleaners, and other household servants in the US. The National Domestic Workers Alliance says the number could be larger because the industry includes many undocumented immigrants. The vast majority of domestic workers here are female and born abroad.

The degree to which employers violate basic rights and may cross the line into trafficking – which involves force, fraud, or coercion to keep a worker from leaving – is hinted at in a 2012 survey of more than 2,000 domestic workers in 14 cities: Nineteen percent had been threatened, bullied, or verbally abused within the past year. Among those living with their employers, 36 percent had been threatened or verbally abused, 25 percent had less than five hours of sleep a night, and 31 percent lacked any means of communicating privately with family or friends.

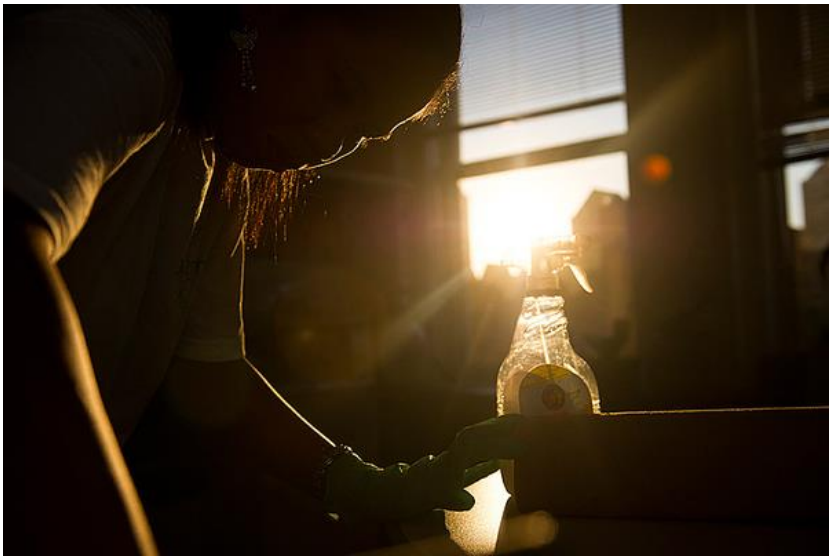
Compared with other labor trafficking victims, those in domestic servitude “are more likely to experience physical abuse and sexual abuse, and have their documents taken from them upon arriving to the US,” says Meredith Dank, co-author of a 2014 report on labor trafficking by the Urban Institute in collaboration with Northeastern University in Boston.

Although the US has had a law protecting victims of trafficking since 2000, and all states have since passed their own such laws, awareness and enforcement have lagged, anti-trafficking advocates say.

There were 544 domestic servitude cases reported to the national trafficking hotline run by Polaris between 2012 and June 2015, but those probably represent just a small fraction of victims. The domestic servitude cases made up about 20 percent of the labor trafficking reports.

About 10 percent of the calls come from people who found the hotline in a know-your-rights brochure the US Department of State created to educate visa applicants abroad.

Many trafficked domestic servants have legal status through a guest-worker visa, but those visas are usually only valid if they stay with that employer. Traffickers often keep control over legal documents, or exploit a person's undocumented status by threatening deportation.



Jing, a domestic worker from the Philippines who is using a pseudonym, cleans The Nature Conservancy office in Manhattan as part of her work with the Damayan Cleaning Cooperative on Sept. 17, 2015, in New York. Jing says she was trapped in a Staten Island home for more than a year before federal authorities and police officers liberated her. Today she is a member of Damayan, a cleaning cooperative owned and operated nine Filipina workers. Ann Hermes/Staff

'My life changed'

Jing hadn't imagined she could break free. But the day she agreed to trust the federal agents, they told her not to say anything to her employers before they returned that afternoon with two police officers.

Then they asked the employer for Jing's passport and accompanied Jean to her room. "I packed my clothes and my important things. My employers tried to stop me. The woman said,'Jing, if you stay for another week we'll give you your airfare back home and I have a gift for your son.' And I said, 'No, I'm going to leave now,' " Jing says, telling her story in Tagalog and some English, with Damayan community organizer Leah Obias interpreting.

"My life changed when I met Damayan, because they gave me work. I met other trafficking survivors.... [I learned] that I shouldn't be afraid … and there are laws for bad employers," Jing says. Now, she adds, "I want to help other people."

Jing hopes to bring her 4-year-old son to the US through a special provision of the federal anti-trafficking law.

Her son was 1 when she left for work in Qatar, and he lives with the family of his father, Jing's partner. She had been able to keep in touch with them somewhat when she first came to the US, but now she enjoys regular

Skype chats. Recently her son started school. After getting a prize one day, he told her, “Mom, look at my hands: I have stars!”

So far, Damayan has helped nine Filipina trafficking survivors reunite with family members.

Because the group’s support for trafficked domestic servants is publicized by local Filipino and other television stations, “the issue ... has been broken open, at least somewhat ... and we now have people who actually self-identify,” Ms. Obias says. “They might recognize their story in other stories and then they come to us.”

A week after her rescue, on Christmas Eve, Jing attended a Damayan social gathering and was surprised to meet a woman who had escaped from the same family two years earlier.

“We hugged and cried,’ ” Jing says.

She heard that her employers left the US about a week after she escaped. Her lawyer has told her she might be able to pursue a case against them if they return to the US, Jing says.

The lawyer working with both women, from the victim-assistance organization Safe Horizon, declined to comment.

The other woman, using the pseudonym Weng, says she was afraid at first to pursue any legal claims against the family. Her daughter is still in Qatar, where Weng worked as a teacher, and she worried about retaliation against her.

But when Weng heard from her attorney about Jing, she says, “I cried again.... How many more victims?”

For labor trafficking to be chopped down at its roots, US immigration policies and the vulnerability of about 12 million undocumented workers need to be addressed, says Denise Brennan, an anthropology professor at Georgetown University and an author on forced labor.

But while they continue to push for comprehensive reforms, advocacy groups like Damayan have been essential in increasing knowledge and safety in their own communities, Professor Brennan says. “That peer-based model of rights work has been wildly successful.”

Their reach is somewhat limited, however, because they operate on small budgets. These groups, Brennan says, should be “not only better funded, but understood as being the missing link to preventing trafficking.”

Their voices are starting to be heard beyond their local communities, as well. Damayan and Adhikaar are both part of a campaign called Beyond Survival, which is bringing the perspectives of domestic-servitude survivors into national policymaking conversations about labor rights and trafficking.
for former victims of all types of trafficking to do likewise. Recently, Congress acted on one of its recommendations, creating a survivors’ council to advise the federal government’s interagency working groups on trafficking.

“Survivors are more than their stories – they’re real experts,” says Stephanie Richard, CAST’s policy and legal service’s director.

A co-op of survivors

A few nights a week, Jing rides an elevator up 16 floors to the Manhattan office of The Nature Conservancy. Surrounded by photos of sand dunes and coral reefs, she spends four hours emptying wastebaskets and cleaning with eco-friendly sprays.

She earns $15 an hour, well above the state's minimum wage. But the job symbolizes something even more valuable: the community connections that make her freedom sustainable.

Her only "bosses" are fellow Filipina members of the Damayan Cleaning Cooperative, many of whom share her first-hand knowledge of what it's like to be virtually enslaved by an unscrupulous employer.

At their regular Tuesday night meeting, the owners munch on potluck dishes and watermelon as they review marketing materials and customer surveys.

Jing and Weng sit side by side, their businesslike demeanor occasionally giving way to waves of laughter and affectionate pats. Several women are wearing white T-shirts with the co-op's green logo: a ring of jasmine blossoms, the national flower of the Philippines.

So far, Jing and one other woman share the Nature Conservancy cleaning contract, which was recently transferred from Damayan to the co-op.

The contract came about two years ago when a Damayan board member working at the Conservancy proposed the idea to Karen Prudente, a Filipino-American who directs finance and operations in the Conservancy's Manhattan office.

Ms. Prudente hired two Damayan workers on a one-year contract. She says she and her colleagues were so pleased with the level of service that they have continued to renew the deal.

It will take time for the co-op to gain enough clients to offer full-time work to the nine founders. The hope is that eventually they'll be able to employ even more workers.

"Co-ops … demonstrate to each person that her voice counts," says Rachel Isreeli, a cooperative developer at the SCO Family of Services' Center for Family Life in Brooklyn, which has provided training and other support.

Many co-op members were once "accountable to their employer … not only for wages but shelter, food, communication with others," Ms. Isreeli says. By contrast, as a co-op owner, "you are the one who has dictated the terms of a contract [and] can leave at any time.... That's a huge shift intellectually, psychologically,… a huge shift in power."

Leah Obias, Community Organizer for Damayan Migrant Workers Association, talks with Weng, a domestic worker from the Philippines who is using a pseudonym, during a walk-a-thon fundraising event for the Damayan Cleaning Cooperative on September 27, 2015, in New York, New York. Damayan is a cleaning cooperative owned and operated nine Filipina migrant workers. Ann Hermes/Staff

‘We were told we can’t leave the house’

For Weng, hurricane Sandy had a silver lining. The storm came not long after she had been brought to the Egyptian family’s New York beach house in October 2012. Weng says the man promised she’d be teaching his children and overseeing a large staff of servants.

But she and two other Filipina teachers who came with her were shocked when told by the man’s wife that they would instead be taking care of the children and the large house and anything else she demanded.

“We were told we can’t leave the house, and there was a security system. That’s when I was scared,” she says, patting her heart.

The hurricane forced the family to live out of hotels for several weeks. One day, when one of the children wanted to look something up on the Internet in the hotel lobby, Weng got permission to accompany him. She spotted a Filipino and asked for his contact information.

“Madame was very angry, saying, ‘I told you, don’t talk to anybody!’ ” Weng says. “I had my rosary and Bible,” she says, motioning her fingers as if the beads are still in her hands, her eyes wet with tears. “I thought, maybe I’m going to die here.”

That incident finally prompted Weng to confide in her daughter in Qatar that she needed help. Her daughter found a Filipina author through Facebook, who put Weng in touch with the consulate in New York. About two weeks later, Weng arranged to have consulate staff meet her at the hotel. Just as she was preparing to leave, another Filipina servant of the family pulled her off the elevator.

As her employer berated her, Weng managed to dial a cell phone surreptitiously so the consulate officials could hear what was going on. Soon, two large policemen knocked at the hotel room door.

“I saw the one, his eyes is like, ‘Come on, I’m going to be helping you,’ ” Weng says in English.

“The madame said, ‘I gonna forgive you if you gonna stay.’… I said, ‘No. I go with you,’ ” Weng says, and she clung to the police officer.

After thanking the consulate officials, she told them, “I don’t know where to go.... Please bring me to a church.”

Weng stayed at a church for a week, and then received a variety of services before connecting with Damayan. Now, she works full time as a filing clerk for a car dealership and is a member of the cleaning co-op.

She’s still afraid to go out alone, though she’s a nature lover and hopes to someday go ballroom dancing.

On her recent 54th birthday, she went to church in the morning and spent the rest of the day at home.

“I just celebrate my birthday here [at Damayan], every Tuesday,” she says with a laugh, looking around the room at her surrogate family.

For help or to report a tip, contact the National Human Trafficking Resource Center at 1-888-373-7888 FREE or by text to BeFree (233733).

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