

From trafficking victim to rescuer: 'I got her out'



Two Nepali relatives were trapped in the same home in the United States. One sneaked out after six months. Freeing her mother's cousin would take a little longer.

By [Stacy Teicher Khadaroo, Staff writer](#) November 2, 2015

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Queens, N.Y. — *This story was written to be viewed on the Monitor's long-form platform.*
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Karmo, a domestic worker from Nepal, was getting nervous. It was nearly 4 p.m. on a Saturday in the spring of 2014, and her rescuers had said they'd come at 3:30.

If they didn't show up to the suburban Virginia home soon, she would be taken to another house, cutting off her opportunity for escape.

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Karmo had a small bag ready, with some clothes, her passport, and her green card. The green card had arrived seven months earlier, but her employer, an Indian woman who had worked for the World Bank, usually locked up the documents. Karmo had recently seen them in an open nightstand and decided to take them.

Now she stood on the verge of a new life.

Karmo first came to the home in 2003. She had no time off, except for brief trips to Nepal to renew her visa every three years. Poor and illiterate, Karmo says she had no better opportunities in Nepal, and her employer told her she had to return because she was spending a lot of money on the green card.

The employer paid her very little – \$2,500 for the most recent nine months, she says – and also made Karmo work for her sister. Letters arrived for her, but her employer withheld them.

In 2005, her cousin's daughter, Sirmaya, worked there with her for about six months.

Both women asked to use only first names because they are considering a civil suit against their former employer. They spoke in Nepali, interpreted by Luna Ranjit, executive director of Adhikaar, a nonprofit that supports Nepalis in New York.

Their employer told them not to speak to anyone, and not to even look out the windows. Police would arrest them or shoot them if they went out, she said.

Because of those fears, Sirmaya only contacted a relative in the area when she became desperate to see a doctor about a severe rash, which her employer had not allowed.

Sirmaya saw her passport out one day, so she grabbed it and sneaked out, staying with her relative while she healed. "After a week, I was too afraid to go back," she says.

That started her nearly decade-long transformation from victim to emancipator.

Sirmaya made her way to New York for another live-in job that turned out to be abusive.

She worked from dawn until midnight. "I had to sleep with the dogs," she says tearfully.

Eventually, she found a job in Queens with a nice family, and lived in a small apartment with a roommate.

In 2010, Sirmaya discovered a Hindu temple in Queens. There she met Narbada Chhetri,

Adhikaar's director of organizing and advocacy, who noticed that she couldn't read. "She told me that I had support," Sirmaya says.

Karmo had no way to contact Sirmaya until 2013, when she received a cell phone from one of her employer's relatives for Christmas. She sneaked into the bathroom to make quick calls to Sirmaya, whose number she had gotten on a trip to Nepal.

The escape plan came together when Sirmaya traveled with Adhikaar to Washington for the National Domestic Workers Alliance conference in April 2014.

Karmo texted a photo of a letter that had come to the house, so Sirmaya had the address.

Ms. Ranjit enlisted help from Casa de Maryland, a group with some experience liberating trafficked domestic workers.

Ashwini Jaisingh, then a Casa organizer, recalls that Saturday: "It was in the middle of some workshop, and Luna pokes her head in, and it was just this thing that was mutually understood.... If we don't do it now, we don't know when it will be possible."

Women from both groups piled into three cars and drove to the house.

"I wanted to get her out in broad daylight, not sneak out," Sirmaya says. "They are the ones who had done wrong, not us."

The employer was surprised and defensive, saying she had gotten Karmo her green card and done so much for her. But she didn't hold Karmo back.

To be free and instantly embraced by her cousin and the other women "felt like a dream," Karmo says.

Back at the conference, hotel workers overheard the story and offered Karmo a free suite for the night. Then she traveled back to New York with Sirmaya.

Karmo is babysitting part time now, trying to find other work, and taking English classes at Adhikaar.

"I went to temple a lot, hoping that one day I would find justice," Sirmaya says. "[Now] every Monday I fast, and my friends think I worship too much, but I feel that I found God.... I am happy. I help other people."

Looking at Karmo with a smile, she adds, "I got her out."

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