

June 14, 2016

Myth: Human Traffickers Only Target “Poor and Uneducated” Individuals

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By Meghan Hampsey

The stereotypical human trafficking victim is often portrayed as uneducated, poor, or otherwise disadvantaged and desperate. Although that can be true, many victims do not fit that image. Traffickers around the world target people of all social strata, education, and economic levels.

Shandra Woworuntu, a prominent human trafficking survivor advocate and advisor to Human Rights First, had a successful career in finance in Indonesia before she was exploited by sex traffickers. Political turbulence caused Shandra to lose her job at an international bank in Indonesia, so she replied to an advertisement and worked with a recruiting company to secure her paperwork and travel documents for a six-month job opportunity at a hotel in the United States. Instead she was sold into sex slavery. [Learn more about Shandra’s story in this video.](#)

In the 2010 case [U.S. v. Askarkhodjaev](#), recruiters lured college students from Mexico, the Philippines, and the Dominican Republic into forced labor by lying to them about the work, wages, hours, and living conditions they would receive in the United States. By charging recruitment fees that left the victims indebted, and threatening deportation if they went to authorities, traffickers were able to control and manipulate the victims into working in various businesses throughout the country.

Traffickers frequently use hidden and excessive fees to force victims into debt, and use threats of adverse immigration consequences to further ensure victims’ continued service. Regardless of their educational attainments or socioeconomic status in their home countries, victims are vulnerable when they do not understand their rights under U.S. law and are afraid of law enforcement.

Traffickers seeking to exploit victims within the United States also do not necessarily target people who are economically disadvantaged, but rather look for individuals who are generally vulnerable to fraud and coercion. Young people are often recruited into sex work through friendships and romantic relationships, as traffickers emotionally manipulate victims into feeling bonded to them and dependent on them. Physical, verbal, and psychological abuse and intimidation are also powerful tactics that can be used by traffickers to subjugate victims of all backgrounds, not just the financially desperate.

For more information on the risk factors for human trafficking and methods traffickers use to exploit people, visit our webpage, [Understanding Modern Slavery](#).

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