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Photographing Human Trafficking in New York

By Evelyn Nieves Sep. 14, 2015 Sep. 14, 2015

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They look no different than anyone else in the rat-race blur of New York's streets. They hold the same jobs — maids, nannies, janitors — as thousands of others who get paid for their work, sometimes well, usually enough to get by.

But the service workers [Xyza Bacani](#) has trained her camera on are worse off than even day laborers. Lured or coerced into leaving their countries for jobs in New York, they become trapped, forced to work off their travel expenses and room and board, stripped of their documents, denied time off, isolated by language barriers, paid a pittance or nothing at all, even beaten.

They are effectively indentured servants. Yes, here and now, in the land of the free.

No one knows how many people are suffering this modern-day slavery in the United States. But guest worker programs that bring migrants to this country on special visas have been fraught with abuse, the Southern Poverty Law Center has found, and survivors of labor trafficking are not hard to find.

Photo



Originally from the Philippines, Cherry Ann Montehermoso converted to Islam after marrying her husband, Shipu. June 29, 2015. Credit Xyza Bacani

Ms. Bacani came to New York for the first time in May after winning a 2015 Magnum Foundation Human Rights Fellowship to New York University for her photos of abused Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong.

“It really surprised me that trafficking is happening in a first-world country like the U.S.,” Ms. Bacani, a 28-year-old Filipina, said. “It also shocked me that even people with college degrees can be victims.”

Her affinity for immigrant domestic workers comes from her experience working as a maid in Hong Kong for nine years, and her mother’s experience with the same household for 20 years.

Originally, she planned to photograph undocumented Filipino workers. But as she dug deeper, Ms. Bacani said, “I learned that the labor-trafficking issue in New York is huge.”

With help from nonprofits like the Damayan Migrant Workers Association, a Filipino domestic workers rights group based in New York and New Jersey, Ms. Bacani spent three months documenting several survivors of labor trafficking. She lived with her subjects, sleeping on their couches, learning their daily routines. When her six-week fellowship term at N.Y.U. was up, she stuck around another six weeks to continue her project, shuttling from Jersey City to Brooklyn to Queens.

These stories revealing the hidden bottom of the nation’s 99 percent are all about fortitude. Among Ms. Bacani’s subjects, we meet Daisy Benin Santos, a single mother who works as a

nanny on the Upper East Side. Lured from the Philippines by a job agency, she was forced into debt bondage and became undocumented when her trafficker, now in jail, let her visa expire.

Photo



Several members of the so-called Florida 15 enjoying a barbecue in the backyard of their shared home. Credit Xyza Bacani

Employed in a decent job now, Ms. Santos lives to Skype with the three daughters she left behind seven years ago. She said she had yet to go home because of bureaucratic snafus.

Ms. Bacani also documented members of “the Florida 15,” as they are known in human rights circles. These 15 Filipinos were trafficked to Miami in 2008 and 2009 with the promise of high-paying jobs. They ended up as cooks, waiters and housekeepers at country clubs and high-end hotels, paid half the minimum wage, or less, once a month, and forced to dole out thousands of dollars in “placement” fees. Eventually, they fled to New York to seek help.

Most now live in and around the city. They applied for special visas for trafficking victims, but as their recruiter cannot be located, their cases remain in limbo.

Ms. Bacani plans to continue this project. Currently living in Hong Kong, she plans to track another member of the Florida 15, as well as Ms. Santos’s children, on her next visit home.

“I did the project because I felt that their stories were worth telling,” she said. “It’s my story, your story, and can be anyone’s story in a flick of a finger.”

Only a year ago, Ms. Bacani was still working as a maid — and sometimes nanny to seven kids — six days a week. On her one day off, she’d take out the Nikon D90 she bought with an advance from her boss several years ago, take street images and post them on Facebook.

When Rick Rocamora, a veteran documentary photographer also from the Philippines, began seeing Ms. Bacani's stunning images on his home feed, he had to know who made them.

One Lens Blog [post later](#), Ms. Bacani was the toast of the photo world. More acclaimed photographers, including Sebastião Salgado, praised her eye, as well as her way with light and subject. More kudos followed her project on domestic workers in Hong Kong. Ms. Bacani was able to quit her job and become a full-time freelance photographer, represented by Marcel Saba at Redux Pictures.

Her dream to be a professional photographer, documenting people too often overlooked, has come true, she said, and the real work has begun.

"I want to give a visual voice," she said, "to these invisible people."