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# How workers are trafficked into the U.S. -- the ugly truth

Griselda Vega and Shandra Woworuntu, special to CNN

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Protests against labor trafficking and modern day slavery outside the United Nations on September 23, 2013, New York.

Shandra Woworuntu is a survivor of human trafficking and the founder of [Mentari](#), a New York-based nonprofit organization dedicated to providing training and economic empowerment support to survivors of human trafficking. Griselda Vega is Senior Director, Anti-Trafficking Program for [Safe Horizon](#), a New York victim assistance organization that touches the lives of more than 250,000 affected by crime and abuse each year. The views expressed are solely those of the authors.

(CNN)For those who read the [New York Times exposé](#) on labor trafficking in the city's nail salons, a manicure will never be the same. The article took a hard look at a service industry that many New Yorkers enjoy, and we hope, as a result, the lives of these exploited workers may change for the better.

Unfortunately, we know firsthand that many of the goods and services we enjoy every day are tainted by what is often referred to as "modern slavery." Through our own experience and work with survivors, we hear what it is like to be a human link in a cruel and profiteering business

supply chain that allows us to have a clean hotel room, a trendy pair of jeans, a night out at a favorite restaurant or delicious piece of fruit.



Griselda Vega, Senior Director, Anti-Trafficking Program for Safe Horizon

Mark, a [Safe Horizon](#) client, was a successful salesman in the Philippines, with a master's degree in Business Administration. Due to the political climate in his country he made the tough decision to leave. Using his minimal savings and additional high-interest loans, he paid hefty recruitment fees to legally enter the United States where he was placed in a hotel job.

Mark was forced to stay in a tiny makeshift room with no ventilation, AC or heater and eight other people. He worked long hours yet was never paid overtime, checks were months late, wages were withheld with no reason as to why. When he complained, he was threatened that if he spoke up he would be deported.



Shandra Woworuntu, Founder, Mentari

Mark's is one of thousands of stories that illustrate how people get caught in the inhumane supply chains that provide clothes, food, electronics, jewelry, and services in restaurants, hotels and nail salons -- the things and services we enjoy every day.

It's astonishing, really, just how easy it is for unethical labor recruiters to prey on people, trick them into paying large sums of money to secure "good jobs in the United States" where victims end up trafficked and trapped under debt bondage with no documents to establish identity or legal status, no English skills, and no easy means of escape.

Susie is a college graduate who also left the Philippines. Promised a job with good pay as a hotel worker, she mortgaged her mother's home and took out a high-interest loan to pay a recruitment agency \$5,000 to process her visa application. In the United States, Susie began working at hotels, and when there was not enough work she was forced to work in restaurants and at private homes doing housekeeping work (i.e. cleaning) for 18 hours a day.

She received minimal pay, and fees were deducted for room, board and other things she didn't understand. At her last hotel job, she asked human resources why she hadn't received a visa extension like many others had, and she was told to leave or the Department of Homeland Security would come and deport her.



Human trafficking survivor and activist Shandra Woworunti, right, with Victims' Rights Representative Ted Poe and Representative Carolyn Maloney at a news conference at the U.S. Capitol last year.

What happened to Mark and Susie can be prevented -- their experiences were made possible primarily due to a lack of regulation on foreign labor recruitment. The [Fraudulent Overseas Recruitment and Trafficking Elimination \(FORTE\) Act](#) (HR 3344) was introduced in the last Congress to address this policy gap, but it did not pass.

Such legislation would deter human trafficking, forced labor and exploitation in part by increasing transparency for overseas workers, providing them with accurate information about the job, visa, and other terms and conditions of work in the United States. It would also require registration of foreign labor recruitment agencies at the Department of Labor, and prohibit recruitment fees paid by workers.

While preventing modern slavery is a pressing, long-term goal, we must also do a better job of assisting victims of this horrendous crime. Our organizations provide services that assist and empower survivors of human trafficking to rebuild their lives.

Once a person escapes a trafficking situation, they may receive immediate crisis services like shelter, medical care and counseling, but they also need language skills, long-term trauma counseling, education, career coaching and job training to truly get back on their feet.

We have seen what happens when long-term services and support are not provided -- too many human trafficking survivors live in poverty and are vulnerable to becoming exploited or even trafficked again. The United States' investment in services for human trafficking survivors falls far short of what is needed to help survivors fully recover from this unimaginable trauma.

The State Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report ranks countries based on their efforts to eradicate human trafficking, and the United States has a Tier 1 ranking. But this top rank doesn't just require a country to have anti-trafficking laws on the books and evidence of enforcement against traffickers -- it also calls for the country's continual improvement in efforts to eradicate modern slavery.

It's time for Congress to pass foreign labor recruitment legislation that will prevent workers from being trafficked across our borders -- and to find the means to provide stable and sustainable support for trafficking survivors through economic empowerment models, scholarship programs and more.

We should demand no less from a Tier 1 country and a leader in the global battle to end modern slavery.