

BOB HERBERT

# Today's Hidden Slave Trade

The woman testifying in federal court in Lower Manhattan could hardly have seemed more insignificant.

She was an immigrant from South Korea and a prostitute, who spoke little or no English. She worked, she said, in brothels in New York, Philadelphia, Georgia, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Washington, D.C.

She did not offer a portrait of the good life. Speaking through an interpreter, she told about the time in D.C. when a guy came in who looked "like a mental patient, a psycho." Weirder out, she wanted nothing to do with him. But she said the woman who ran the brothel assured her everything would be fine.

It was fine if you consider wrestling with Hannibal Lecter fine. The john clawed at this woman, gouging her flesh, peeling the skin from her back and other parts of her body. She was badly injured.

According to the government, the woman was caught up in a prostitution and trafficking network that ruthlessly exploited young Korean women, some of whom "were smuggled into the country illegally."

In prior eras, the slave trade was conducted openly, with ads prominently posted and the slaves paraded and inspected like animals, often at public auctions. Today's sex traffickers, the heirs to that tradition, try to keep their activities hidden, although the rest of the sex trade, the sale of the women's services, is advertised on a scale that can only be characterized as colossal.

As a society, we're repelled by the slavery of old. But the wholesale transport of women and girls across international borders and around the U.S. — to serve as prostitutes under conditions that in most cases are coercive at best — stirs very little outrage.

Leaf through the Yellow Pages in some American cities and you'll find pages upon pages of ads: "Korean Girl, 18 — Affordable." "Korean and Japanese Dolls — Full Service." "Barely Legal China Doll — Pretty and Petite."

The Internet and magazines have staggering numbers of similar ads. Thousands upon thousands of women have been brought here from Asia and elsewhere and funneled into the sex

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trade, joining those who are already here and in the business but unable to keep up with the ferocious demand.

This human merchandise — whether imported or domestic — is still paraded, inspected and treated like animals.

What's important to keep in mind is the great extent to which the sex trade involves real slavery (kidnapping and rape), widespread physical abuse, indentured servitude, exploitation of minors and many other forms of coercion. This modern-day variation on the ancient theme of bondage flourishes largely because of the indifference of the rest of us, and the misogyny that holds fast to the view of women — all women — as sexual commodities.

The case in Manhattan federal court involves a ring that, according to prosecutors, used massage parlors and spas as fronts for prostitution. Some of the women were in the U.S. legally. Others, according to the government, were brought in by brokers (more accurately, traffickers or dealers in flesh), who provided false passports, visas and other documents.

Elie Honig, an assistant United States attorney, said women brought in illegally were pushed into prostitution to earn money "to pay back the tens of thousands of dollars that the brokers charged the women as quote, unquote, fees for bringing them into the United States."

He told the jury: "We are talking about a regional network of businesses throughout the Northeast United States and beyond involved in transporting and selling women."

A jury will decide whether the five defendants in this case — all Korean women, and accused of running a prostitution enterprise — are guilty. But the activities alleged by the government mirror the sexual trafficking and organized prostitution that is carried out on a vast scale here in the U.S. and around the world.

There is nothing benign about these activities. Upwards of 18,000 foreign nationals are believed to be trafficked into the U.S. each year. According to the State Department, 80 percent of trafficked people are women and children, an overwhelming majority of whom are trafficked for sexual purposes.

Those who think that most of the women in prostitution want to be there are deluded. Surveys consistently show that a majority wants very much to leave. Apologists love to spread the fantasy of the happy hooker. But the world of the prostitute is typically filled with pimps, sadists, psychopaths, drug addicts, violent criminals and disease.

Jody Williams is a former prostitute who runs a support group called Sex Workers Anonymous. Few women want to become prostitutes, she told me, and nearly all would like to get out.

"They want to quit for the obvious reasons," she said. "The danger. The physical and emotional distress. The toll that it takes. The shame."

Gail Collins is off today.