Tale of Modern Slavery #1: Child maids now being exported to US

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Late at night, the neighbors saw a little girl at the kitchen sink of the house next door.They watched through their window as the child rinsed plates under the open faucet. She wasn't much taller than the counter and the soapy water swallowed her slender arms. To put the dishes away, she climbed on a chair.But she was not the daughter of the couple next door doing chores. She was their maid.

Shyima was 10 when a wealthy Egyptian couple brought her from a poor village in northern Egypt to work in their California home. She awoke before dawn and often worked past midnight to iron their clothes, mop the marble floors and dust the family's crystal. She earned $45 a month working up to 20 hours a day. She had no breaks during the day and no days off.

The trafficking of children for domestic labor in the U.S. is an extension of an illegal but common practice in Africa. Families in remote villages send their daughters to work in cities for extra money and the opportunity to escape a dead-end life. Some girls work for free on the understanding that they will at least be better fed in the home of their employer.

The custom has led to the spread of trafficking, as well-to-do Africans accustomed to employing children immigrate to the U.S. Around one-third of the estimated 10,000 forced laborers in the United States are servants trapped behind the curtains of suburban homes, according to a study by the National Human Rights Center at the University of California at Berkeley and Free the Slaves, a nonprofit group. No one can say how many are children, especially since their work can so easily be masked as chores.Once behind the walls of gated communities like this one, these children never go to school. Unbeknownst to their neighbors, they live as modern-day slaves, just like Shyima, whose story is pieced together through court records, police transcripts and interviews.

"I'd look down and see her at 10, 11 — even 12 — at night," said Shyima's neighbor at the time, Tina Font. "She'd be doing the dishes. We didn't put two and two together."Shyima cried when she found out she was going to America in 2000. Her father, a bricklayer, had fallen ill a few years earlier, so her mother found a maid recruiter, signed a contract effectively leasing her daughter to the couple for 10 years and told Shyima to be strong.For a year, Shyima, 9, worked in the Cairo apartment owned by Amal Motelib and Nasser Ibrahim. Every month, Shyima's mother came to pick up her salary.

Tens of thousands of children in Africa, some as young as 3, are recruited every year to work as domestic servants. They are on call 24 hours a day and are often beaten if they make a mistake. Children are in demand because they earn less than adults and are less likely to complain. In just one city — Casablanca — a 2001 survey by the Moroccan government found more than 15,000 girls under 15 working as maids.

The U.S. State Department found that over the past year, children have been trafficked to work as servants in at least 33 of Africa's 53 countries. Children from at least 10 African countries were sent as maids to the U.S. and Europe. But the problem is so well hidden that authorities — including the U.N., Interpol and the State Department — have no idea how many child maids now work in the West."In most homes, these girls are not allowed to use so much as the same spoon as the rest of the family," said Hany Helal, the Cairo-based director of the Egyptian Organization for Child Rights.

By the time the Ibrahims decided to leave, Shyima's family had taken several loans from them for medical bills. The Ibrahims said they could only be repaid by sending Shyima to work for them in the U.S. A friend posed as her father, and the U.S. embassy in Cairo issued her a six-month tourist visa.She arrived at Los Angeles International Airport on Aug. 3, 2000, according to court documents. The family brought her back to their spacious five-bedroom, two-story home, decorated in the style of a Tuscan villa with a fountain of two angels spouting water through a conch. She was told to sleep in the garage.

It had no windows and was neither heated nor air-conditioned. Soon after she arrived, the garage's only light bulb went out. The Ibrahims didn't replace it. From then on, Shyima lived in the dark.She was told to call them Madame Amal and Hajj Nasser, terms of respect. They called her "shaghala," or servant. Their five children called her "stupid."While the family slept, she ironed the school outfits of the Ibrahims' 5-year-old twin sons. She woke them, combed their hair, dressed them and made them breakfast. Then she ironed clothes and fixed breakfast for the three girls, including Heba, who at 10 was the same age as the family's servant.Neither Ibrahim nor his wife worked, and they slept late. When they awoke, they yelled for her to make tea.

While they ate breakfast watching TV, she cleaned the palatial house. She vacuumed each bedroom, made the beds, dusted the shelves, wiped the windows, washed the dishes and did the laundry.Her employers were not satisfied, she said. "Nothing was ever clean enough for her. She would come in and say, 'This is dirty,' or 'You didn't do this right,' or 'You ruined the food,'" said Shyima.She started wetting her bed. Her sheets stank. So did her oversized T-shirt and the other hand-me-downs she wore.While doing the family's laundry, she slipped her own clothes into the load. Madame slapped her. "She told me my clothes were dirtier than theirs. That I wasn't allowed to clean mine there," she said.

She washed her clothes in a bucket in the garage. She hung them to dry outside, next to the trash cans.When the couple went out, she waited until she heard the car pull away and then she sat down. She sat with her back straight because she was afraid her clothes would dirty the upholstery.

It never occurred to her to run away.

"I thought this was normal," she said.If you could fly the garage where Shyima slept 7,000 miles to the sandy alleyway where her Egyptian family now lives, it would pass for the best home in the neighborhood.The garage's walls are made of concrete instead of hand-patted bricks. Its roof doesn't leak. Its door shuts all the way. Shyima's mother and her 10 brothers and sisters live in a two-bedroom house with uneven walls and a flaking ceiling. None of them have ever had a bed to themselves, much less a whole room. At night, bodies cover the sagging couches.

Shown a snapshot of the windowless garage, Shyima's mother in the coastal town of Agami made a clucking sound of approval.

"It's much cleaner than where many people here sleep," said Helal, the child rights advocate. He explains that Shyima's treatment in the Ibrahim home is considered normal — even good — by Egyptian standards.Even though many child maids are physically abused, child labor is rarely prosecuted because the work isn't considered strenuous. Many employers even see themselves as benefactors."There is a sense that children should work to help their family, but also that they are being given an opportunity," said Mark Lagon, the director of the U.S. State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.That's especially the case for well-off families who transport their child servants to Western countries.

In 2006, a U.S. district court in Michigan sentenced a Cameroonian man to 17 years in prison for bringing a 14-year-old girl from his country to work as his unpaid maid. That same year, a Moroccan couple was sentenced to home confinement for forcing their 12-year-old Moroccan niece to work grueling hours caring for their baby.In Germantown, Md., a Nigerian couple used their daughter's passport to bring in a 14-year-old Nigerian girl as their maid. She worked for them for five years before escaping in 2001. In Germany, France, the Netherlands and England, African immigrants have been arrested for forcing children from their home countries to work as their servants.

In several of these cases, the employers argued that they took the children with the parents' permission. The Cameroonian girl's mother flew to Detroit to testify in court against her daughter, saying the girl was ungrateful for the good life her employers had provided her.

Shyima's mother, Salwa Mahmoud, said her father believed she would have better opportunities in America."I didn't want her to travel but our family's condition dictated that she had to go," explained Mahmoud, a squat, round-faced woman with calloused hands and feet. She is missing two front teeth because she couldn't afford a dentist.If she had stayed here in Egypt, she would have been ordinary," said Awatef, Shyima's older sister. "Just like us."

On April 3, 2002, an anonymous caller phoned the California Department of Social Services to report that a young girl was living inside the garage of 28 Pacific Grove.A few days later, Nasser Ibrahim opened the door to a detective from the Irvine Police Department. Asked if any children lived there beside his own, he first said no, then yes — "a distant relative." He said he had "not yet" enrolled her in school. She did "chores — just like the other kids," according to the police transcript.

Shyima was upstairs cleaning when Ibrahim came to get her. "He told me that I was not allowed to say anything," said Shyima. "That if I said anything I would never see my parents again."When police searched the house, they turned up several home videos showing Shyima at work. They seized the contract signed by Shyima's illiterate parents.

Asked by police if anyone other than his immediate family lived in the house, Eid, one of the twins, said: "Hummm ... Yeah ... Her name is Shyima," according to the transcript. "She uh ... She works — she works for us at the house, like, she cleans up the dishes and stuff like that."Twelve-year-old Heba got flustered: "Yeah. She's uh — my — uh — How do I say this? Uh ... My dad's ... Oh, wait, like ... She's like my cousin, but — She's my dad's daughter's friend. Oops! The other way. Okay, I'm confused."

Heba eventually admitted that Shyima had lived with the family for three years in Egypt and in California.The police put Shyima in a squad car. They noted her hands were red and caked with dead, hard-looking skin.

___For months Shyima lied to investigators, saying what the Ibrahims had told her to say.

She went without sleep for days at a stretch. She was put on four different types of medication. She moved from foster home to foster home. Her mood swings alarmed her guardians. In school for the first time, she struggled to learn to read.Investigators arranged for her to speak to her parents. She told them she felt like a "nobody" working for the Ibrahims and wanted to come home. Her father yelled at her.

"They kept telling me that they're good people," Shyima recounted in a recent interview. "That it's my fault. That because of what I did my mom was going to have a heart attack."Three years ago, she broke off contact with her family. Since then she has refused to speak Arabic. She can no longer communicate in her mother tongue.

During the 2006 trial, the Ibrahims described Shyima as part of their family. They included proof of a trip she took with the family to Disneyland. Shyima's lawyer pointed out that the 10-year-old wasn't allowed on the rides — she was there to carry the bags.The couple's lawyers collected photographs of the home where Shyima grew up, including close-ups of the feces-stained squat toilet and of Shyima's sisters washing clothes in a bucket.In her final plea, Madame Amal told the judge it would be unfair to separate her from her children. Enraged, Shyima, then 17, told the court she hadn't seen her family in years."Where was their loving when it came to me? Wasn't I a human being too? I felt like I was nothing when I was with them," she sobbed.

The couple pleaded guilty to all charges, including forced labor and slavery. They were ordered to pay $76,000, the amount Shyima would have earned at the minimum wage. The sentence: Three years in federal prison for Ibrahim, 22 months for his wife, and then deportation for both. Their lawyers declined to comment for this story."I don't think that there is any other term you could use than modern-day slavery," said Bob Schoch, the special agent in charge for Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Los Angeles, in describing Shyima's situation.

Tale of Modern Day Slavery #2

Sunday, November 12, 2006

Human Trafficking Cases Increase in El Paso by Louie Gilot

Human trafficking cases increase in El Paso Photographs of men, women and children filled the screen. But they didn't tell the whole story. A shy Chinese boy is pictured. He was forced to work in restaurants in El Paso and North Carolina. A young woman poses on a stationary bike. She was lured into the sex trade from her native Uzbekistan. Two middle-aged couples smile at the camera. The pair on the left were deaf and mute victims of human traffickers. On the right were the traffickers. "You have to look beneath the surface. You'll not know it when you see it," Brandy Gardes, an assistant U.S. attorney in El Paso, told hundreds of law enforcement officers and social workers at a conference last month in El Paso.

Officials have called human trafficking one of the toughest crimes to tackle. It is hard to identify and hard to prove. Victims are often too scared to speak out. And the public and juries have a hard time believing slavery still goes on in the United States. The U.S. Department of State estimated that 18,000 to 20,000 people are trafficked into the United States each year and held by force or coercion for sexual slavery and forced labor. Between 2001 and 2005, the Justice Department prosecuted fewer than 150 alleged traffickers. There are no figures for El Paso, but it was chosen by the Justice Department as the site of one of 18 new human-trafficking task forces in the nation as part of a far-reaching effort to bring the problem out of the shadows. A community's response-- Task-force coordinator Paul Piñon is training police officers to recognize the signs. He said El Pasoans can also play a crucial role in spotting traffickers' safe houses and trafficking victims. "We feel that the majority of situations will come to light through the involvement of the community."

Neighbors may notice that a large number of people live in a house but never congregate outside except to be picked up for work. Often, El Paso is a pit stop for traffickers on their way to California and elsewhere. But some cases with elements of human trafficking began here. Gardes prosecuted two such cases -- the 1998 exploitation of Mexican deaf and mute men and women by two El Paso sisters, and the 2001 sexual exploitation of women from Uzbekistan by a UTEP research assistant. The culprits were convicted, but not for human smuggling, and were sentenced to prison time. Trafficking victims are not necessarily foreigners, but the great majority are. One case going to trial Monday can also be classified as human trafficking, Gardes said. It is the prosecution of the owners of a far East El Paso quarry, where Mexican undocumented immigrants worked and lived in substandard conditions. The owners were charged with harboring undocumented immigrants. Gardes said prosecutors usually apply

human-trafficking charges in cases where the use of force can be proved because those cases are stronger in court.

However, most human traffickers use coercion or fraud to keep their victims enslaved. Not 'vanilla smuggling' Often, what starts as "plain old, vanilla human smuggling," as Gardes put it, turns into trafficking when the migrant can't pay. Gardes showed the photograph of a field worker standing on top of a large farm truck -- a scene common across the Southwest. His name is Ricardo, she said. He was smuggled across the border in Arizona and abandoned in the desert for eight days with only three days' worth of food and water. He was found by another smuggler who offered to guide him, for a fee. When Ricardo couldn't pay, the smuggler sold him to a Florida labor contractor for $1,100. This became Ricardo's debt. He worked in a field for $80 a week to repay it.

At the same time, his trafficker overcharged him for rent and other necessities. Gardes said he was never meant to be able to repay the debt. One day, another trafficking victim escaped, was recaptured and was beaten in front of Ricardo and the others. "At this point, Ricardo realized this was really slavery," Gardes said. Ricardo eventually escaped and testified against his traffickers. He still receives death threats. In a recent case in El Paso, police rescued a 15-year-old Salvadoran girl at the Downtown Greyhound bus station after her smuggler asked her family in California for ransom. In Juárez, officials at Casa del Migrante shelter, which helps migrants after they have been deported back to Mexico or after they fail to cross, said they have housed a few women who said their smugglers tried to sell them. Brainwashed Collaboration between police and private aid organizations is crucial to tackle human trafficking, officials said. A new El Paso case in which a 14-year-old Guatemalan boy allegedly held in Fabens was presented as a model of cooperation to the White House's faith-based initiative task force, social workers involved said. The boy allegedly worked at a Fabens store, slept in a camper shell in a backyard and washed his clothes with a garden hose.

Law enforcement officials would not say more because the investigation continues. When the boy was placed in custody at the migrant children detention center in Canutillo, he was suicidal and refused to speak to FBI agents for two days. Elvia Garcia, a supervisor at the Diocesan Migrant and Refugee Services, was called to help. After several hours of small talk, the boy finally opened up. "It takes a whole community to take care of a victim of trafficking," Garcia said. Many victims come from Third World countries where police corruption is rampant, and they learn not to trust law enforcement officers. They are also brainwashed by traffickers who tell them the police would not believe their outcry and would put them in jail or deport them. In reality, victims of trafficking have legal recourse. In 2000, the Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which broadened the federal status and gave victims the T Visa to allow a three-year stay in the United States.

During that time, victims can apply for a green card. Charles Song, the director of legal services for the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking in Los Angeles, said that less than 1 percent

of trafficking victims he has helped chose to go back to their countries. That's because traffickers often have associates abroad who threaten the victims and their families. Florencia Molina, 34, of Mexico, was a trafficking victim in Los Angeles in 2002, sewing dresses for 17 hours a day, every day for months. At night, she was locked inside the clandestine workshop. Her trafficker held her papers, and Molina did not speak English. She summoned the courage to flee and ended up testifying for the FBI. Molina spoke at the El Paso conference. She said that her trafficker, an important woman in her native Mexican village, was sentenced to six months of house arrest. Then she went to Mexico, looking for Molina. Molina obtained a T Visa and is living in hiding in the Los Angeles area. She now works as a security guard and dreams of becoming a sheriff's deputy, she said. "I feel protected in the United States," she said.

Traffickers use various techniques to keep victims enslaved. Some traffickers keep their victims under lock and key. But most use less obvious techniques, including: -Indebting victims. -Limiting victims' contact with outsiders and making sure that any contact is monitored or superficial. -Isolating victims from family members and members of their ethnic and religious community. -Confiscating passports, visas and other identification documents. -Threatening violence toward victims or the families of victims. -Threatening to shame victims by exposing circumstances to family. -Telling victims they will be imprisoned or deported for immigration violations if they contact authorities. -Holding victims' money for "safekeeping. Source: Department of Health and Human Services.

Signs that human trafficking is going on may include: -Not enough people going in and out of a home. -Or, too many people going in at strange times. -Only male guests going to a party could be a sign that the place is a brothel. -Children hanging out at the house, instead of going to school. -Periodic rotation of people living in the house. -Residents who leave the house only to go to work (usually driven there by the traffickers) and back and don't congregate outside or interact with neighbors. -For health providers: Be suspicious when a patient is never left alone with the staff and has someone else who speaks for him/her at all times. -For bank tellers: Take note when one person is cashing checks from several persons who have signed them over. Source: Human Trafficking Task Force.

Tale of Modern Slavery #4:

Child Sex Trafficking Growing in the U.S.: 'I Got My Childhood Taken From Me'

By HUMA KHAN
WASHINGTON, May 5, 2010—

M.S. was 12 years old when she first fell in love. It was his "swagger" that attracted her, she recalled, laughing.

The pre-teen, who lost her mother at a very young age and only saw her father on holidays, said she desperately craved a father figure. All she ever wanted was to be loved, she said, and she thought she found that in the man who patrolled up and down her street wooing her.

"I just fell into his arms," said M.S., who didn't want her full name revealed because she is a minor.

One day, the man invited M.S. to go on a drive with him. She did, and she never returned home.

For four years, M.S. was forced into child prostitution with four different pimps. She was taken from city to city, forced to have sex with random men against her will. She rarely got to keep any of the $1,500 she made every day. Instead, she was abused mentally and physically by both her pimps and other girls who he housed.

"I got my childhood taken from me," M.S., now 17, told ABC News. "I used to think this is what I'm supposed to do, and I just did it. ... It was normal to us."

M.S. was scared to run away, afraid that her pimps would turn their threats into hurting her family into reality. Even when, two years after being sold into sex, M.S. found out that her grandmother and sister had put out fliers looking for her and had even put her name on the missing persons list, she didn't contact them.

"I was scared of them judging me," she recalled.

M.S. is one of thousands of American girls who are part of sex trafficking chains in the United States. It is a problem many associate with developing countries, but is one that is increasingly plaguing the United States.

"I think many Americans are more willing to accept that there are girls enslaved in Cambodia or Delhi, and really can't imagine that it's happening right here," actress Demi Moore said at a briefing on Capitol Hill Tuesday. "As a society, we owe it to them to ensure this doesn't happen to anyone else."

Moore and her husband, Ashton Kutcher, recently created The Demi and Ashton Foundation

to raise awareness about the issue of sex slavery worldwide.

The Department of Justice estimates that more than 250,000 American youth are at risk of becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation. The average age of entry for female prostitutes in the United States is between 12 and 14 years, and children and youth older tha 12 are prime targets for sexual exploitation by organized crime units, according to a 2001 report.

In addition to domestic girls who are exploited, about 14,500 to 17,500 girls from other countries are smuggled into the United States for this purpose, according to the State Department.

"We know so little about our daughters who are bought for sex," said Malika Saada Saar, president of The Rebecca Project for Human Rights, which organized the briefing Tuesday to bring attention to the issue of domestic sex trafficking.

There is a "cyber slave market that is being built up by Craigslist and other Web sites," Saada Saar said, and most of the time, the pimps who buy and sell these girls are never arrested or jailed.

Many of the children sold into the sex trade come from broken families or the foster care system. Often times, as in the case of M.S. and Asia, they are looking for an escape and for the one thing they say they didn't find at home, love.

"This is a new and emerging phenomenon. Ten years ago, there were not the same disturbing stories of traffickers seeking out and preying on girl runaways within 48 hours after they have left home," Saada Saar wrote in the Huffington Post.

"Why is this happening? There is the Internet, which has created an easy and accessible venu for the commercial sexual exploitation of children. As a result, young girls are the new commodities that traffickers and gangs are selling. And, there isn't a culture of crime and punishment for selling girls as there is for selling illegal drugs," she wrote.

Asia, who was lured into the trade at the age of 18, says it was eerie how well her pimp knew what she was looking for.

"It's like he knew I was vulnerable, and he was looking for people like me," she told ABC News. "He told me constantly he would take care of me, it wasn't going to be like this. ... It was like false promises but he made it sound so good. That's what he does, he was an expert at it."

Sex Trafficking Becoming Growing Problem in U.S.

The now 20-year-old who is studying criminal justice said her sole mission back then was to get through the day. Even when she was sick or stricken with infection, she was forced to

have sex, often for up to 10 hours a day with 10 different men.

"I feel like all I was trying to do was survive, get away from home, just be happy, but it was never like that," said Asia, who was raised by her grandmother.

Asia said that once she was part of the sex trade, she didn't feel she had anyone to turn to. Like M.S., she didn't want to go back to her family out of shame and fear, and she didn't feel safe outside the vicinity of the hotels she lived in.

"It was like I was in a totally different world in society," Asia recalls. "Like when we would g out to eat, I felt everyone knew who I was and what I did and there was embarrassment. ... Being outside, you feel vulnerable."

Both M.S. and Asia said they were arrested and thrown into jail, and that the police treated them like criminals, even when they knew they were minors. Often times, police officers solicited their services, the girls said, or they had relationships with pimps.

"They would just send me to jail and keep me here for like a couple of months, then they'd release me thinking everything's good," M.S. said. "I was scared to run to the police or cops o something because you know... I don't think they'd really listen. They try to set up a date witl you knowing that you were a minor. They didn't care."

Under U.S. law, human traffickers can get life in prison if convicted. But many of these traffickers are never caught. Both M.S. and Asia said their perpetrators are still roaming free.

Government officials say a key problem is lack of coordination between states and agencies, but that the government is looking at the root causes and how they can be eliminated.

Francey Hakes, the Justice Department's national coordinator for child exploitation prevention, said Tuesday the agency has arrested and charged hundreds of people with sexual exploitation and that it was doing more to address sex crimes against children.

"This is modern day slavery at its worst, and it's a winnable war," said Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., who sponsored a law targeting sex trafficking in the House.

The girls said all they want to do now is look to the future. M.S., who sought help at one of the Crittenton Foundation facilities, said she hopes to write a book some day to tell other girl in her position they can move on with their life. The 17-year-old said she is still having a hard time integrating into society because she can't trust anyone, even those who are trying to help her, but she will do anything to not return to her old life.

"I've seen a lot of girls get kidnapped. I've seen a lot of people get killed out there. I've seen a lot of things," M.S. said. "I would do anything to be a strong, independent woman."

Asia, who is currently a volunteer mentor at non-profit Fair Fund, said she wants to help

change the system she was once a part of, but said the stigma of being a prostitute is not one that she can recover from easily. The student said she was supposed to go to the White House for meetings but was not able to get access because of her record.

"I'm not a criminal. I never hurt anybody. My intention was just to survive and it's just hard, it's not fair," she said. "Just look at me as a victim. Don't let my past prevent me for being the best person I can be, don't let it prevent me from getting a job or doing day-to-day things."