



Beyond Rescue

Life Interrupted: Trafficking into Forced Labor in the United States

By Denise Brennan

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Reviewed by Melissa Hope Ditmore

In May 2014, *Newsweek* featured Somaly Mam, a prominent antitrafficking activist from Cambodia, on its cover. She had been covered in the publication before and was renowned for her work, which included traveling to the United States to raise money for her foundation. Her entourage on these trips included young women who told stories of being raped, mutilated, and forced into prostitution in the small Southeast Asian country, and of how much Mam helped them. Their horrific accounts generated emotional responses. Mam's approach was extremely successful, launching her into celebrity activist

status and generating more funding for her shelter than it could absorb. The *Newsweek* article highlighted discrepancies in Mam's personal story and of those she had rescued, and led to her resignation from her eponymous foundation.

Stories like Mam's, of victimization and rescue, exemplify the typical approach to human trafficking—which is turned upside down in *Life Interrupted*, by Denise Brennan, a veteran advocate for the rights of migrant workers. For Brennan, leaving the exploitive situation is the beginning, not the end of the story. She focuses on what happens to people after they have escaped.

She begins by explaining what trafficking is: a category of immigration that includes force, fraud, or coercion in a workplace. Trafficked workers experience violence and abuse. Traffickers frequently hold the workers' passports, thereby controlling their movements. Some are held essentially in captivity and instructed not to speak to anyone. Often they find that their work pays far less than their original agreement specified, especially after traffickers have taken spurious deductions for travel, rent, work gear, and food, claiming that the workers have run up a "debt" to them. These workers may be denied wages for years.

Trafficked workers are theoretically eligible to remain in the United States on so-called T-visas and to receive assistance similar to that received by other refugees, including English language classes and job placement assistance. However, only a small percentage of trafficked migrants have actually accessed these resources. Police perceptions of the migrants as criminals and rushed deportations after immigration raids make identifying trafficked workers difficult. So, even though the federal government is permitted to issue as many as 5,000 T-visas per year, Brennan notes that fewer than 4,000 have actually been granted since the program was created in 2000.

Additionally, even when trafficked workers do receive services, these are not sufficient. Learning English is important, but so are other job skills, if one is to move out of low-wage, service jobs such as baby sitting. Many poor people must travel long distances between jobs and home, or between one job and another. Using public transit adds hours to their workdays; yet many cannot drive, are not permitted to obtain drivers' licenses, or can't afford a car. People setting up a home require cooking implements and furniture, but they may lack the money to buy basic supplies, especially if they must wait a long time for permission to work in the US. Finally, the time limits imposed on receiving assistance prevent many from taking full advantage of it. Poor immigrants, who lack a financial cushion in their new country, live hand to mouth, so any unforeseen expense turns into a crisis of debt and instability.

Trafficking, argues Brennan, is an inadequate frame through which to approach the problems of immigration and labor reform. It addresses only one situation and does not fully address the more general problem of the employment of underpaid, highly exploited immigrants (along with a smaller number of US citizens who are especially vulnerable due to youth, substance dependency, or isolation).

Brennan focuses in particular on the experiences of formerly trafficked individuals, mostly women, who did domestic, sex, or factory work. All comment on the "normalcy" of exploitation and abuse: the jobs often looked all right at first. However, they would soon expand to fill every moment—like that of a live-in nanny who was eventually expected to be on call 24 hours a day and finally to sleep in the room of her charges. Brennan argues that this kind of gradual expansion makes it difficult to draw the line between trafficking and lesser exploitation—another reason why "trafficking" is an inadequate frame for addressing immigration and labor issues.

Brennan points out parallels between the history of labor in the United States and the situation today.

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Child workers, bribery in the workplace, and "sweaters," or middlemen, who would hire people to work in sweatshops, are not phenomena of the past. Today's "sweaters," for example, are subcontractors who hire people to work as office or shopping mall cleaners—in the process obscuring the reality of the working conditions, so the person actually paying for the services may not be aware of the degree of exploitation in which he or she has become involved.

Brennan describes legislative measures that make it impossible for exploited migrants, including trafficked persons, to report unsafe or poor conditions. When local police are deputized to function as immigration agents, immigrants reasonably avoid having any interactions with them. Trafficked workers, who may have experienced threats to family and loved ones, do not feel they can turn to the police for assistance. For trafficked sex workers the problem is particularly acute, since they fear they are being actively hunted by police, along with the American nationals in their workplaces.

Women who escape trafficked situations usually continue to work in low status, poorly paid positions, as home health aides, domestics, child care workers, or in the sex trade. Their working conditions are different, of course—but they face new problems: for example, they must pay for rent, food, health care, and other basic expenses. Sex work may offer fast money, but it never offers benefits, and the women Brennan describes cater to ethnic markets that offer them few opportunities to make connections in other communities or social classes.

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The so-called American Dream was based on the assumption of well-paid work, even for low-skilled jobs. What is missing in this book is an explanation of the social cost of Americans' cheap food, goods, and services: a permanent underclass laboring in forced or subsistence working conditions. This has long been the situation of agricultural workers in the United States, but the demise of union factories and the rise of service work has spread the paradigm to other sectors of the economy. The demand for cheap goods and services comes at the too-high price of personal exploitation.

One of the most important sections of Brennan's book includes suggestions for action and ways to become involved in improving the lives of trafficked persons. While awareness campaigns have drawn attention to the problem and spawned a groundswell of interested volunteers, their actions are often unhelpful to victims. Brothel raids may be exciting, but what trafficked workers really need is long-term support to help them get back on their feet after forced labor situations, when they are left with no savings or money of their own. People who have received T-visas need social and professional help to move out of the economic underclass. Indeed, the success

stories Brennan identifies required long-term assistance, such as stable housing and steady work, sometimes provided at great personal sacrifice by strangers, acquaintances, or church communities.

Brennan's account confirms the results of my own investigations into the lives of immigrants pursuing or in possession of T-visas. She demonstrates that a commitment to each individual is what it takes to help trafficked persons transcend poverty. These important findings are the result of studying real people who have left extreme situations, and assessing which factors made the difference between moving ahead or struggling forever. I fear that the daily struggles of actual trafficked persons will continue to be overshadowed by the hype of awareness campaigns by individuals and organizations that do not offer needed services, but that raise funds using exploitative practices and sensationalized stories.

Melissa Ditmore is a research consultant who has written two reports about people trafficked to the United States, including "The Road North" (Sex Workers Project, 2012). She has written numerous books and papers on sex work, migration, and gender. She is working on a book about forced labor in the United States.

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