

# AFOLABI CASE: BEAUTY INDUSTRY

## RECRUITMENT

Using multiple fraudulent visa schemes, traffickers recruit young West African women from impoverished villages to work in the United States.

2002

2003

2004

2005

2006

2007

2008

2009

## EXPLOITATION & ISOLATION

Traffickers transport over 20 women and girls to various hair salons in New Jersey, where they are forced to work from 8 to 14 hours a day, 6 to 7 days a week, without pay. The victims are able to speak with customers, but are constantly supervised. All passports and travel documents are confiscated.

## ESCAPE

One victim escapes from the residence. She remains in contact with other victims.

## INVESTIGATION

ICE conducts surveillance of several hair salons and investigates residences based on the escaped victim's information.

## ARRESTS

Traffickers are arrested after ICE raids the homes where the victims are kept and finds the victims sharing rooms with mattresses on the floor.

## ICE IS INFORMED

Escaped victim informs ICE agents of the abuses taking place at the salon.

## CONVICTIONS

Two of the traffickers are convicted of several counts at trial, including forced labor, visa fraud, smuggling illegal aliens, trafficking with respect to forced labor, and conspiracy.

**THE FOUR TRAFFICKERS in this case ran a scheme to smuggle more than twenty West African girls—some as young as 10 years old—into the United States for the purpose of working in hair braiding salons in New Jersey.**

## Traffickers' Methods and Strategies

### Recruitment

Traffickers would approach young women, aged 10 to 19 years old, and their families in West Africa with promises that they could come to the United States, learn a trade, and go to school. They would then fraudulently secure diversity visas for the young women.

Diversity visas are awarded by the U.S. Department of State through a lottery, reserved for citizens of countries that are determined to be underrepresented in the United States, including Togo. The grantees of these diversity visas receive a DV-1 class visa, which then makes them eligible to apply for diversity visas for immediate family members. Their spouses receive DV-2 class visas, and children receive DV-3 class visas.

Starting in October 2002, these traffickers sought out male DV-1 visas holders and solicited them to fraudulently sponsor women and girls from several West African countries by claiming they were related to them. In exchange, the traffickers would pay the men's visa application fees.

Traffickers would travel to Togo and Ghana to recruit young women to fraudulently claim they were the spouses and daughters of DV-1 visa holders, in order to get their own visas. The traffickers would often use physical punishment and voodoo rituals to intimidate the women and pressure them into complying. The traffickers would then coach the DV-1 class visa holders to lie about their relationships

## PEOPLE INVOLVED

- 4 Traffickers
- Many Facilitators/Enablers
- 2 Bystanders
- 20+ Victims

with these women during interviews at the American Embassy in Togo.

### Exploitation

Once in the United States, the victims were forced to work without pay at several hair braiding salons in New Jersey.

The victims lived with the traffickers or in residences controlled by them. Their passports, visas, and other immigration documents were confiscated so they could not escape, and they were not allowed to speak to their families in Africa without the permission and supervision of the defendants. They were also barred from speaking with people outside of work and their residences, barred from attending school, and were often beaten and occasionally forced to have sex with one of the male traffickers.

## Case Resolution

Trafficker 1 was found guilty on all 22 counts for which she was indicted, which included: Conspiracy to commit visa fraud; visa fraud; 2 counts smuggling illegal aliens; conspiracy to commit forced labor and trafficking; forced labor; trafficking with regard to forced labor; and, conspiracy to harbor aliens. She was sentenced to 27 years in prison, and ordered to pay \$3.9 million in restitution.

Trafficker 2 took a guilty plea on 4 Counts: Harboring aliens; conspiracy to commit forced labor and trafficking; forced labor; and, transportation of a minor with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity. He was sentenced to 24.3 years in prison and ordered to pay \$3.9 million in restitution.

Trafficker 3 took a guilty plea for conspiracy to commit

forced labor and trafficking, and was sentenced to 4.5 years in prison and ordered to pay \$3.9 million in restitution.

Trafficker 4 was found guilty in a separate trial for visa fraud and conspiracy to commit visa fraud. He was sentenced to 26 months in prison.

The traffickers' lawyer argued at trial that they had merely been running an apprenticeship program, which are common in West Africa. The traffickers claimed that the girls were treated according to the same strict cultural rules and standards that are typical of most Togolese households.

## Opportunities for Intervention and Key Sources of Risk to Traffickers

The victims in this case would have been in contact with immigration authorities at the U.S. embassy in Togo and again upon entry into the United States. At some point, authorities began investigating the defendants' enterprise, but it is unclear what triggered the investigation. The diversity visa application process, like that of H-2 visas, has the potential for abuse and should be monitored with an eye toward the prevention of trafficking.

It is unclear from the record whether the young women were farmed out to work in other braiding salons in addition to those owned by defendants. In general, salon owners should be educated about the warning signs of labor trafficking in order to avoid inadvertently using forced labor. Additionally, it is unclear from the record whether there were other employees at the defendants' salons (or at any other salons to which the victims may have been sent). Salon employees should also be educated to identify signs that their coworkers may be victims of trafficking.

Although the defendants actively sought to isolate the young women, countless customers may have missed opportunities to intervene when they came in contact with

the victims in the hair braiding salons. Upon investigation it was revealed that several customers had asked about the girls' ages, after which the girls lied and said they were 18. Concerned patrons could have still alerted the police or called the Human Trafficking Hotline\* if they observed a consistent pattern of excessive labor by children.

## Conclusion

This case involves a trafficking operation that relied heavily on close community ties (one of the traffickers exploited her own niece). It also involved a fairly complex visa fraud scheme exploiting the diversity visa program. While many trafficking cases revolve around the exploitation of worker visa programs, such as the H-2B visa, additional research must be done to scrutinize the DV visa application system and the safeguards that are in place to ensure that applicants are not in fact victims of exploitation.

Increased awareness in consumer-facing industries where trafficking is prevalent, such as hair and nail salons and spas, will enable consumers to recognize signs of trafficking, avoid patronizing businesses that appear to exploit their workers, and report suspicious activity to the proper authorities. ■

\*National Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline  
1.888.373.7888