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The Family as a Protective Factor: Economic considerations of Bangladeshi labour trafficking survivors

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Abstract

Economic dependence often exists within trafficked immigrant families, both before the human trafficking situation and after family reunification in the United States. While economic dependence can deepen individuals' vulnerabilities to human trafficking, this article explores how the family unit can serve as a protective factor, especially for those who have recently experienced family reunification. Writing from the perspective of social service providers, we utilise a composite case study of several clients to exemplify how families can support and protect each other within their new environment in New York City and after reunifying with extended family members. This case study demonstrates that social service providers must adopt a family and community-centric approach to survivor support to ensure they strengthen the ability of the family unit to serve as a protective factor against further exploitation for trafficking victims in the US.

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Introduction

Labour trafficking is often the result of multiple socio-economic risk factors that create cycles of exploitation and violence.[1] One of them is the social expectations on men as primary financial providers. In 2022, Womankind, a New York City-based non-profit providing services to survivors of all forms of gender-based violence, began experiencing a significant shift in the demographics of clients

[1] International Labour Organization, *Profits and Poverty: The economics of forced labour*, ILO, Geneva, 2014, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_243391.pdf.

served within its anti-human trafficking programme. Within two years, the share of cisgender men climbed to a historic high of 43% of the programme's clients. Many of them were part of a larger group case of men from rural areas of Bangladesh trafficked to Saipan, the capital of the Northern Mariana Islands.[2] Many of them received their T visas (for victims of human trafficking) and eventually made their way to New York City; several began reaching out to the organisation for help as an entire family unit. As advocates worked with clients, we began to observe a complex reunified family dynamic and noted that the family structure within the United States was both a risk and protective factor in the lives of these labour trafficking survivors.

In this short article, we describe this dynamic through a composite case study of Bangladeshi men who migrated to Saipan for work, were identified as victims of trafficking, and reunited with their families in their new environment of New York City.

Rahim's Story

'Rahim' is a 43-year-old married man. He was initially recruited in Bangladesh with the promise of higher earnings at a retail warehouse in the Northern Mariana Islands. His recruiters demanded exorbitant recruitment fees and informed him that he needed to work a certain amount of time before he could return home. Thinking about his family and how he would be able to provide a better life for his children, Rahim decided to take the job and travelled to Saipan. His wife, Ria, then became the only parent left in Bangladesh and cared for both their children and their extended family members.

In Saipan, Rahim did not receive the work that he was promised, had to pay for his own accommodation, was subjected to physical abuse and verbal threats from his traffickers, and was told not to speak with other Bangladeshi workers.[3] Through word of mouth by other Bangladeshi community members in Saipan, Rahim connected with a social services agency who ultimately connected him and other workers to the US Attorneys' Offices. They assisted him with securing a T visa. As he considered his next steps, Rahim learnt from other formerly trafficked community members about anti-trafficking programmes in New York City that

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2 United States Attorney's Office, District of Guam & the Northern Mariana Islands, 'Muksedur Rahman, Md. Rafiqul Islam and David Trung Quoc Phan Sentenced for Mail Fraud, Fraud in Foreign Labour Contracting, and Visa Fraud', 9 March 2018, https://www.justice.gov/usao-gu/pr/muksedur-rahman-md-rafiqul-islam-and-david-trung-quoc-phan-sentenced-mail-fraud-fraud.

3 *Ibid.*

could provide him with some economic and legal support. He connected with an organisation and sought social services. Rahim soon disclosed fearing that his family was in danger of being trafficked too due to threatening text messages they received. He thus wanted to reunify as soon as possible with his wife, three children, and at least one aging parent. Rahim's advocate and an intergovernmental organisation assisted him in bringing his family members to the United States.

Several months later, once they had been reunified in New York City, Rahim began to have problems financially supporting his family. Their former economic dependence on him and traditional Bangladeshi family structure posed a challenge; the same risk factors associated with a desperation for better economic opportunities for his family and the pressure for Rahim to earn enough income to support everyone was starting to grow once again. There was a possibility that the fraud and exploitation associated with his human trafficking experience could repeat as his family struggled to navigate life in the US.

With the help of his advocate, Rahim and his family applied for and received public assistance (PA).[4] Rahim's advocate continued to help him map out his existing resources, including the support of his neighbours and community in New York City. This provided him with more peace of mind that his family would not always need to rely on him to afford food or pay medical bills. It took Ria some time, but she learnt some English through the support of her neighbours and cousins who had immigrated from Bangladesh several years earlier. She also asked to be assigned her own advocate at the organisation and received emotional support to process her experiences. Through community connections and economic empowerment trainings from the organisation, she ultimately found employment. Their three minor children attend school and receive after-school care.

One day, Rahim suffered an injury as he was returning home and became temporarily unable to work. This created a short-term strain on the family's income. Although in Bangladesh, she was never the primary financial provider, Ria now stepped in to cover some of the family's financial needs. She utilised various services to secure financial support for utilities, winter clothes, and one month of rent, as well as after-school support for the children. Ria also became more aware of what constitutes poor labour practices and her rights as a worker. The family were able to navigate this challenge as they bridged the income gap together and averted a financial crisis.

[4] Public assistance is temporary help distributed in the United States to families, children, or individuals in need. Programmes vary per state. In New York, eligible individuals or families can access programmes that provide cash assistance for food, rent, utilities, or other living expenses.

Rahim and Ria utilised this time to deepen their ties to their local community. They started identifying better work environments, learning more about legitimate financial resources such as safe temporary work with taxable income rather than uncertain and unstable gig work. Now, for the first time, the family depends on each other and works together instead of being solely dependent on Rahim as financial provider. It is far from a perfect life and every day brings new emotional and financial challenges, but they feel more prepared for life together in New York City.

Discussion

This composite case study highlights that family dynamics can play both a risk and protective factor in survivors' vulnerability to further labour exploitation. One risk factor is that the family relies solely on the husband to be the financial provider, which can cause the rest of the family to experience a financial crisis if he loses his job. Conversely, keeping the family unit together as immigrants to the United States actually allows for Rahim's wife to engage in paid employment and absorb some of the losses of income. Advocates noted that Bangladeshi men seek legal immigration help for their wives to receive their Employment Authorization Documents and Social Security Numbers in order to also find a job and help with high living costs. These services can ultimately give women more autonomy over their households and daily lives. They also become more involved in the household's decision-making. This dynamic can cause the family unit to become a protective factor for male trafficking survivors.

Another protective factor is the family unit's relationship to broader community ties and its integration into a network of support. Survivors, immigrants, and neighbours help each other not just through temporary housing and mutual aid, but also through referrals to and an informal vetting of support organisations. In Rahim's case, word of mouth was very important because it encouraged trafficking survivors and their families to seek and navigate social services in New York City. The community can help families to identify and contact a variety of resources to meet their respective needs, including legal immigration services, English language classes, employment, and informal support groups. The community additionally can re-construct more flexible norms and protect individuals and families from exploitative practices in their new country.

While navigating these new dynamics, a family-related risk factor is that men internalise the stigma of not being the financial provider and are left feeling that they failed their family's expectations. Men do not often self-identify as 'victims' or 'survivors' and may not seek counselling. Instead, as we saw in Rahim's story, they focus on tangible and practical needs, including housing, legal immigration assistance, food, cash assistance, and employment. As a result, not having

emotional outlets of support or even confirmation that they are experiencing some form of exploitation can increase vulnerabilities to risky employment and unhealthy relationships. Training case workers on public assistance (PA), such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, would help clients and their families access PA more quickly and with less likelihood of denials.[5] PA can allow family members to meet basic needs and alleviate financial stressors, leaving space to emotionally support each other. This could, in turn, serve as a protective factor for men to process their trafficking experiences and remove some of the stigma associated with being unable to provide for their families.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While economic dependence on men as the primary financial providers in the family can make them more vulnerable to labour trafficking or other forms of exploitation, the family unit itself can serve as a protective factor if the dynamics can be navigated after reunification in a new country. Rahim's story demonstrates some important implications regarding the risk and protective factors of the family's economic dependence on men. Social service providers can strengthen families and their communities through their services, reducing cycles of labour exploitation and trafficking. The community also plays a significant role in sharing resources and extending the web of support. The family itself would then have more opportunities and means to support each other and create positive changes in their communities.

To ensure that the family acts as a protective factor against further exploitation, we make several recommendations to social service providers in New York City. Firstly, as organisations continue to receive Bangladeshi labour trafficking clients, service providers should ensure that they have adequate capacity to handle their cases. This means having enough case workers and legal staff available to assist clients and their families. Secondly, capacity also implies that case workers are properly trained to provide trauma-informed care and meet the needs of the family as a unit, moving away from an individualistic focus on survivors. Since clients often come from a culture where traditional gender norms persist that see men as households' primary financial providers, staff should be trained on family dynamics within Bangladeshi communities layered with the challenges of being recent immigrants. Supervision of staff should also be used as a way to promote, respect, and celebrate cultural diversity. Providers could consequently create more

[5] When clients and their families apply for PA, they are often denied help due to insufficient paperwork or PA staff's unfamiliarity with the Health and Human Services certification letter. The HHS certification letter allows the client's family to access benefits while they wait for their social security numbers and employment authorisation documents.

flexibility in services and build deeper rapport with clients by understanding the dynamics of family units.

Thirdly, social service programmes should seek survivors' feedback and suggestions to better understand which resources and processes were most helpful. Since Bangladeshi men and their families typically live within their own communities and with those who share similar experiences, it is possible to develop better rapport and ask how they are adjusting to life in their communities after receiving services. The information could demonstrate how clients utilised the resources and incorporated them into their lives, which would allow programmes to simultaneously refine and expand their work.

Providers should also support the establishment and development of new community groups and resources. Clients often refer each other to different organisations for help, and information spreads quickly. Clients are more inclined to seek services when they hear first-hand about positive experiences from other community members. Specific organisations are also coalescing around social service and advocacy issues affecting South Asian communities in New York City. Such groups can work alongside other organisations to extend the web of support.

Finally, providers must advocate for policy changes, such as the increase of federal and local funding to improve capacity and services for survivors and their families. They should also encourage the education and training for all public assistance offices, so that survivors can access critical benefits. Providers should also advocate for the creation of more comprehensive economic empowerment programmes that focus on long-term stability and better pay.

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