

By Grace Kahng
NBC News producer NBC News producer
updated 2/3/2011 2:03:14 PM ET 2011-02-03T19:03:14

Sex slavery in America: One girl's nightmare

Wendy escaped captivity near Houston after six years; her friends weren't as lucky

To 15-year-old Wendy, the two well-dressed men who approached her and her two friends at their middle school in the small Honduran village of El Gancho seemed like legitimate businessmen: They appeared wealthy, drove a nice car, and carried business cards. When the pair offered to take the three girls to America to work in a textile factory, "I felt like I had won the lottery," Wendy says.

Wendy had long dreamed of helping her single mother support the seven children in their family. When her mother warned against going with the businessmen, Wendy told her not to worry. "When I come back, I will buy you a car," she told her mother, so that she would no longer have to walk 22 miles to her job in a pineapple field.

In 2002, Wendy and her friends, 15-year-old Sujeli and 14-year-old Ana, embarked upon a journey that would turn into a nightmare of being kidnapped, beaten, raped and forced to work in brothels servicing six to 10 men a night. Wendy says she worked alongside girls as young as 12 who were given daily beatings if they did not make enough money for their captors.

Booming business

Experts like U.S. Attorney Ed Gallagher say that selling women and young girls is a business second only to the drug trade: a booming, \$28 billion-a-year enterprise. "I think most Americans would be shocked to learn that there are sex slaves right here in Texas," says state investigator Mike Barnett of the Texas Alcohol and Beverage Commission.

The T.A.B.C. has cracked down on the dozens of cantinas that have opened up on the outskirts of Houston serving liquor and selling girls. Investigators stumbled into an illicit world where young women and girls are held captive as virtual sex slaves and sold for \$65-\$100 an hour for sex. Experts estimate that thousands of such girls are in cantinas throughout U.S. border towns.

"You walk into a cantina and choose a beer and a girl. The girl's beer costs anywhere from \$15 to \$20, and you are buying the company of that girl for the time that it takes her to drink that beer. Then, if you want to have sex with her, you take her to the back where you pay cash for a mattress, paper towels and spermicide," Barnett says. "These cantinas are printing cash."

With as many as 20 girls in each cantina, prosecutors like Linda Geffin, chief of the Harris County Attorney's Special Prosecution Unit, say these organized criminals are tough to battle.

After six years, Wendy escaped one such Houston cantina. A kind American family allowed her to call her mother for the first time since her captivity began. "I was so happy. I felt like a bird who had been living in a cage," Wendy says — but she still lives in daily fear for her family.

Sadly, her friends Sujeli and Ana have not been so lucky; Wendy learned from her mother that neither of the girls' friends or families have ever seen or heard from them again. Ana's mother died without knowing the fate of her only daughter.

“Life is hard,” says Epanpanio, Ana’s father. “Every time I see a young girl, it reminds me of the daughter I lost.”

MSNBC traveled to Honduras to investigate missing girls, and to Houston to profile the small state agencies that are waging battle against the vicious human traffickers who sell women.

“I’ve seen farmers that treat their livestock better than these men treat these women,” says investigator Barnett. “I think the average American citizen would be disgusted if they realized that this is happening right here in the U.S.”

“Sex Slaves: Texas” airs Sunday, Feb. 6 at 8 p.m. ET on MSNBC. For more information, visit santokiproductions.com.

© 2011 MSNBC Interactive.

http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/41409991/ns/today-today_people/#