Life Interrupted

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Eliza works two jobs as a caregiver, one during the day, and the other at night. Two days a week she wakes up at 3 A.M. to take a shower and walk forty minutes to the bus stop to work the early shift. Sending money back to the Philippines, she explains, “I work for my kids.” Living in sprawling Los Angeles, Eliza spends her time between jobs riding buses. “I’m never home. It takes me three hours to get to my job that begins at ten p.m. So I leave the first job at six p.m., and then get on a bus, then a train, then another bus. At least I can sleep while I travel.”

Formerly trafficked persons reenter the workplace changed. They have altered expectations of what constitutes good working conditions, relationships with employers, and colleagues. At work they can voice demands and set limits on others’ demands on them. The income they earn offers relief from temporary housing arrangements, independence from the financial support of others, and is essential to staying in the United States. They often draw strength from their work and feel valued, despite low wages or few chances for mobility. Over the years Maria’s various employers have remarked, for example, on her loving dedication to the children in her charge. She knows she is good at her job. She also knows she does not have the
skill set to find work that offers more money, security, or status. With her modest wages, and the money she received from a civil award from her abusers, Maria has transformed her son’s future in the Philippines by paying for college and building him a house. She has changed the lives of her extended family by purchasing a banana farm along with a truck to bring their produce to market. She has paid the college tuition for several nieces and nephews. She even has helped pay for part of the tuition costs for a total stranger—a young man whose number she dialed by accident while she was trying to reach her son. After talking a long time, and learning how much he longed to finish his studies, she offered to help. Maria mentions his success with the same pride she expresses about her son’s.

Maria also has transformed her own life. Instead of working into her old age in fields, as her mother did, Maria has a job that does not demand constant physical labor. And, she has had the opportunity to travel with the families for whom she works, seeing places in the United States she would not visit otherwise. But the vagaries inherent in child care as a profession have meant that Maria has worked with at least six or seven different families since I first met her in 2004. She often works with employers for too short a period to earn raises, she does not receive any health care benefits, and she has no retirement fund. There is no doubt that her career in the United States allows her to earn significantly more than she could in the Philippines, and, as a result, she is able to remit funds that make her extended family’s life more secure. Yet while her remittances make a considerable impact on her family in rural Philippines, Maria has lived with tremendous financial insecurity in the United States, often relying on her boyfriend to pay the household bills when she was between jobs. Without the civil award, and her boyfriend’s steady salary, Maria could not have afforded to make large capital investments in the house and the farm or to send remittances. (She has since broken up with the boyfriend after she found out he had been cheating on her. She is now married to a man she knew for seven years before they started dating; he is a doorman in one of the apartment buildings in which she used to work.)

A recent typhoon devastated the banana farm that Maria has worked so hard to underwrite. While they wait for their trees to grow back and bear fruit again, her extended family does not earn the same kind of money working on nearby farms that Maria earns. The timing of the typhoon could not have been worse for Maria. Around the same time, a fire in her apart-
ment destroyed her and her new husband’s belongings. And, just two days before the typhoon she had been dismissed, once again, from her child care job. Yet despite her precarious economic state, she knew that she would land another job and soon would be able to send money to help her family get through the lean times ahead (she ended up being out of work for about two months). While they try to get on sure economic footing in the United States, formerly trafficked persons continue to be tied to families’ needs and calamitous events in their home countries.

The anthropologists João Biehl and Peter Locke describe the strategies that resilient individuals like Maria use to maneuver around foreclosed “life chances.” Over time formerly trafficked persons pursue new work and school opportunities that were not open to them in their home countries. Out of coerced labor a new labor subjectivity emerges, which shapes their sense of self and future possibilities in the United States. Security and success are subjectively experienced and measured against a backdrop of what is and is not possible in their home countries. Flo moved from working as a child care provider in her home country in Africa to obtaining a nursing assistant degree and is now saving to go to college to become a nurse. Also a nursing assistant with plans to continue her studies, Eva affirms that such opportunities would not be open to her in Mexico—or to anyone in her social class.

Work as Zone of Empowerment

In Paul Willis’s classic ethnography on British working-class “lads”’ relationship to work, work impedes connections and cuts the young men off from the world, not the reverse: “Labour power is a kind of barrier to, not an inner connection with, the demands of the world. Satisfaction is not expected in work.” But for formerly trafficked persons, the workplace becomes a crucial site to feel valued and a part of something of their choosing. They also often first make friends and learn about the United States through the workplace. Since most work before they are reunited with their children (or have children in the United States), they do not have the opportunity to build such networks through their children’s schools or activities. And, they are anxious to get to work. Aside from women who followed boyfriends, most formerly trafficked persons came to the United States to work. Work and its transformative possibilities had featured prominently in their imag-
ining of opportunity in the United States even before they entered the country. After forced labor they finally have the chance to actualize what they had come to the United States to do.

While other low-wage workers may be surrounded by family, kin, and friends who over time have learned that the workplace usually does not offer economic mobility, formerly trafficked persons often have expansive expectations for what work can bring into their lives. They can be less concerned about the particular form of labor than the respect that work conveys—as well as the ability to finally keep all of their own earnings. The anthropologist Daniel Dohan found that new migrants from Mexico and Vietnam in a northern California barrio similarly are “eager to hold a job—any job” since they view working low-wage jobs as “part of a difficult but sensible path toward higher status.” Embarking on a strategy of “overwork,” they work long hours at multiple jobs.

Working also can be therapeutic. Social service providers throughout the United States report that while their trafficking clients often put off mental health therapy, they want to work right away. It gives structure to the day. Without work, many complain of having too much time on their hands and of replaying their past abuse in their minds. Soon after Maria had exited forced domestic labor, she spoke of wanting to work all the time: “Ever since my situation I wake up every morning at four-thirty or five. I think about my past situation. I wish I could go to work early in the morning.” Julia designs her day so that she is almost always working, going to school, or studying: “It’s hard juggling it all, but if I don’t do something, I have to think about what happened to me. So if I am in school and busy, I don’t think about it too much.” Work is often central to a sense of control in one’s life. Work helps trafficking clients, according to one California-based social worker, “move ahead.” “They usually are fast planners. It keeps them from getting emotionally depressed. Even when there is a setback they say, ‘Okay, this was a setback, so now what do we do, what’s next?’”

Work thus can be a reprieve from racing thoughts and worries and also help stave off loneliness and homesickness. When I first met Flo, she was running from school to work, with little time for sleep. Before they were reunited, she missed her husband terribly (at the time his paperwork to enter the United States was stuck in a bureaucratic black hole). She was constantly worried about the economic hardships her family faced while her home country experienced political upheaval, violence, and economic decline. Working was a refuge from these worries. “I don’t mind working so
much. If I sit and read a book I start thinking about my husband’s paperwork and about my family. It makes me so sad. I would rather keep busy.” Her social worker recommended that she speak with a therapist, but Flo declined. “You don’t go just once. You go over time. But I really don’t have time to do this.”

The workplace is also one of the first sites formerly trafficked persons negotiate on their own, without the guidance of social workers or attorneys. Reclaiming the experience of work can deliver a profound sense of accomplishment. After moving to New York City from the Midwest, where she had been trafficked into forced domestic labor, Gladys threw herself into school and work: “I wanted to forget everything. I wanted to do something in my life. I suffered a lot.” Her abuser had regularly demeaned her. “He told me I would never learn English. He told me, ‘You think you are going to learn in just a couple of years?’ And I did and proved him wrong.” Learning English, passing the GED exam, and working in a retail job where she feels respected by her employer—and has considerable responsibilities such as opening and closing the shop—are the steps that Gladys has taken to put new possibilities in place. She summons strength to take risks by recalling how she had crossed the border: “I did it myself. It took three days with no water. I tell myself now that I am not doing that for nothing.”

When I met Gladys, her parents and younger siblings were about to join her in the United States (a benefit associated with her T visa), and she was buzzing with ideas about their future together. Not cowed by the responsibility of being the only member of her family with English skills and an income, she instead was determined to get her family “strong.” As Gladys prepared for the arrival of her parents and younger siblings, she imagined what she could help make possible for all of them. Feeling obligated to her parents while also eager to have their approval (they had forbidden her to go out with an older man, which led her to run off and to her eventual trafficking into forced labor), she shouldered a great responsibility. “I want to change my parents’ minds about me.” She also wants her sisters and brothers “to think for themselves.” “I want to change things for them and make sure that they have choices here that they don’t have at home.” She has a tentative business plan for the family. Since they sold fruit in Mexico, she hoped that they could sell it on the street in New York and one day open a restaurant. From mourning over the childhood taken from her, to moving to a city in which she knew only a former boyfriend, she now readied herself for the role of family breadwinner, translator, and cultural guide. “They
will have me here to help them. I want to teach them. I want to show them everything.”

Work as Zone of Disempowerment

As much as formerly trafficked persons try to open new opportunities for themselves and their families, they face many obstacles in the low-wage marketplace. Work and school can be sites in which formerly trafficked persons are reminded of their limitations. While some, like Flo and Maria, deliberately overbook themselves, others cannot find full-time work. Some describe not being able to focus or follow through. One woman in the Washington, D.C., area had enrolled in a course to prepare for the GED but did not finish the program because she “couldn’t stand sitting still and studying.” She was overwhelmed by balancing school, work, and running to many appointments related to her case. A formerly trafficked person in New York has started and quit a GED review course a number of times. Pointing to the review books lying around her apartment, she was exasperated: “I don’t know where to begin. I just can’t do the math no matter how many practice tests I take.” After years of feeling that their lives were out of control, some formerly trafficked persons quickly abandon challenges that unmoor rather than empower. Social workers consequently walk a fine line between building up their clients’ confidence to pursue challenges and assessing what they realistically can manage and possibly master. Potentially constructive experiences can become dispiriting and destructive. The trafficking client in the Washington, D.C., area, for example, says, “[People] are always mad at me because I do things last minute and I’m unorganized.”

Not earning enough money causes constant worry. Pushed and pulled by outstanding travel debts and family expectations to send money, formerly trafficked persons see their low-wage salaries quickly disappear. “They feel stuck because of debts,” comments a social worker in Texas. “I just met a client who told me she cannot survive on her minimum-wage job. But she doesn’t speak English well and cannot find a better-paying job.” With so many obstacles to landing jobs that pay well, the social worker in Texas reluctantly concedes, “it may be their kids who succeed, not them. These are truly resilient people who are working and studying. But most are just staying afloat. It’s their kids who are doing well. They are in school, learning English. And with them here, the parents no longer worry about who is taking care of them back home.”
Some formerly trafficked persons do not have the time, skill set, or personality to strategize about using work (and the school it may require) to get ahead. Those without a high school degree or strong English-language skills are not likely to move into better-paying jobs with greater status. A staff member at a domestic violence shelter in Los Angeles emphasizes that many of the formerly trafficked persons she meets know full well that their jobs in housekeeping or child care will not catapult them into a new social class. The shelter meanwhile gets calls from people who want to donate “interview clothes.” Clear-eyed about the limitations of low-wage work, the staff member explains, “Our residents are going into housekeeping. They don’t need these clothes. They need steady work.”

Subjective Valuations of Good Jobs

Formerly trafficked persons’ relationship to work not only is remade by their time in forced labor but is also shaped by their work experiences before forced labor. Whatever they achieve in the U.S. labor market may surpass what is possible and expected back home where work choices may depend on class, racial and ethnic categories, gender, and generation. They also may cut a new path away from their family’s labor histories that often are tied to one geographic space and one labor sector. If they come from a place where everyone works in fields or factories, they may believe they have no other work choices open to them. They also may not have experience creating opportunities. Unfamiliar with choosing among or cultivating different options, some formerly trafficked persons seize the first opportunity that presents itself, assuming that no better option will become available.

Trafficking clients’ assessments of what are good jobs and what are unacceptable vary widely. These subjective valuations keep social service providers on their toes. Jobs that have an easy commute, use existing skills or teach new ones, and involve working with one’s coethnics—or not—may be highly valued. Jobs that offer the opportunity to speak one’s native language may be chosen over those that offer higher pay. This was a priority during the resettlement process of Thai workers who were held in forced labor in a garment sweatshop in El Monte, California. Since this case was reported in 1995, five years before the TVPA was passed, their resettlement was uncharted territory. Every step was a learning experience for all involved. A community advocate described how at first it was “bewildering” to the social service community that some of those who went to work in garment
manufacturing jobs with solid benefits were unhappy. They wanted to work with Thai contractors in their own language, even if that meant giving up higher wages and benefits. For many of these workers, explains the community advocate, “not working on a farm was an achievement.”

Social workers’ and community organizers’ notions of a “good job” have been frequently challenged as they help formerly trafficked persons find work. One social worker in New York learned from years of working with domestic violence clients to not make any assumptions about what clients may value. One of these domestic violence clients, a woman from Bangladesh whose children were grown, wanted to find a new husband. “This was her main goal,” recounts the social worker. “For her, it meant being independent. Otherwise her adult daughter would have taken care of her. In the United States women who seek to be taken care of often are seen as passive and looked down on. But she felt empowered and active since she had a plan.” What one client may value and pursue, another may dismiss. A social worker in Texas explained that she had helped a few trafficking clients find jobs as seamstresses, but when she suggested this as a possible route to other clients, “they thought this kind of work was terrible.” Esperanza identified respect as her main priority. After working in retail, where she had felt invisible, she sought out a position as a security guard. The pay was only marginally better than what she had been earning in her retail job. But the job commanded respect: “People respect what the guard says. This is the most important part of my job to me. To have respect.”

Since her English-language skills were not strong, Jamie, from Malaysia, knew she had limited job choices and earning power. Her first job as a bagger in a supermarket paid minimum wage and offered only part-time hours. At the time, her two children were soon due to arrive from Malaysia. She assessed her options. She had years of experience working in child care both at home and in Saudi Arabia, so she decided to look for a job in child care. She made the calculation that she would not land a better-paying job. “I don’t know how to use a computer, so this is a good job for me.” She sees her child care jobs in the United States as a major improvement over her work in Saudi Arabia, where she had been “cooking and cleaning all the time. And not sleeping. All for very little money.”

Social workers and other assistance providers try to guide clients to work options they may not have considered, while also respecting the clients’ own understandings of success and priorities. An attorney with trafficking clients in New York City pointedly asks, “How do you measure success?”
She runs through various scenarios: “Some have small children, so they don’t work, and thus their English is only marginally better. It takes a certain type of person to think ahead. Many clients have a third-grade education. They married at thirteen. But a better way to frame this is to ask, ‘Are they on track with their peers in their community?’” Hoping to spark ideas, she asks clients what they would like to do if there were no “barriers,” such as language. She also connects clients with job counselors at social service organizations, suggests a financial literacy workshop, and follows up to make sure they are getting paid their agreed-upon wage.

Similarly a social worker in New York tries to lead clients to “see themselves differently.” She makes suggestions that her clients may not have contemplated: “When someone says ‘I want to be a home health aide,’ we can suggest being a nurse.” She also pushes her colleagues and herself to ask themselves if they unintentionally expect different plans from different clients. “Do we treat white clients and black clients equally? Do we have higher expectations of some clients—from certain countries—over others?” Ultimately, however, it is up to the client to make decisions: “If you are working harder than the client, then there is something wrong.” Overwhelmed, some clients “shoot themselves in the foot by ‘oversleeping’ and missing an interview. They undermine themselves before they even get a chance to fail. Self-sabotage like this can be an outgrowth of how some formerly trafficked persons see themselves and what they deserve. People at the margins of our society can’t participate fully and manipulate their environment to their advantage. There can be a learned helplessness, a disempowerment. They don’t expect things to work out. They may believe ‘Whether I do this or not, everything sucks anyway.’”

Labor Histories and Making Demands
To explain workers’ politicization, labor scholars examine past injustices suffered as well as workers’ involvement in fighting them. In his book on Mayan workers in a furniture factory in Morganton, North Carolina, the historian Leon Fink connects these workers’ past experience with “boss control” on coffee plantations to their present workplace protest. During conversations with formerly trafficked persons, I asked about their past work experiences, mistreatment, and activism. Many told of intermittent income-earning opportunities in their home communities (often in backbreaking agricultural work), a culture of migration for work, and normaliza-
tion of debt. Suzanne explains that if she had stayed on her family’s farm in Indonesia, where they grow vegetables and rice, she too would be working in the fields like her parents. Many in her hometown opt instead for work overseas, arranged by recruiters. “They go to Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan and work in child care and housekeeping.” Even after Suzanne told her younger sister about her abusive experiences in forced domestic labor, her sister still made arrangements to migrate internationally for work: “I told her what happened to me. And she still wanted to go. I said ‘Just stay home and help out our parents.’ But she doesn’t want to because there is more money if you work in Saudi Arabia. She can make about $800 a month, which is a lot of money in Indonesia.”

Many formerly trafficked persons’ previous work experiences unfolded within a logic of employer invincibility. Maria says there were few chances to make demands in her past jobs, but today she is assertive about what must be in place before she accepts a job, such as overtime pay and vacation days. Over the years she has increased her demands, learning from employers’ unfair treatment. When she was working for a family as a child care provider soon after her exit from forced labor, her employers did not pay her while they visited their home country in Scandinavia for three weeks during the Christmas and New Year holidays. Maria was furious, asked for back pay, and quit when they refused. Referring to her time in forced labor, she is emphatic that she will never be taken advantage of again: “I make the decisions in my life now. No one else tells me what to do.”

Maria was in a position to walk away from this paying job in part because at the time she was living with her boyfriend. She also knew she would not be out of work for long. She easily could tap into extensive social networks at the community-based organization where she was an active member. Since the majority of the organization’s members work as child care providers, they operate as a kind of informal job bank for each other, passing on names of friends to prospective employers. Impressed by her loving care of the children in her charge, other families living in the same luxury apartment building where one of her past employers lived also offered Maria jobs. Once fair, respectful arrangements are made, Maria does not allow herself to take a break. When asked to work late or on the weekends, she always says yes. Her self-identity, formed as part of a rural peasantry, is modeled on that of her parents: “I will always work, just like my parents. They worked [as farmers] until they were old and sick.”

Some need time to develop the courage and skills to make demands.
Often this evolves after they make decisions they regret. Carmen wishes that she could revisit a series of decisions that she made in the months immediately following her exit from forced labor. “I was young, only twenty when I left. I wanted to move on. I’ve changed. I was so naive.” Like Maria, she is clear about her standards: “No one will ever tell me what to do again.” Emphatic about calling out mistreatment, Carmen and Maria nonetheless have weathered instances of firings and reduced hours. Carmen, for example, experienced a traumatic firing from hotel housekeeping following a fight with a coworker who had cornered her in a shower, enraged by Carmen’s suggestions that she clean the toilet more thoroughly. Carmen’s brief time as a supervisor had yielded several run-ins with coworkers, all of which were noted in her employee file. Management treated this incident as the last straw. Even though Carmen sought help from an attorney, she remained out of work for close to a year (she was living with a boyfriend at the time). Her short-lived experience taking on more responsibility at work convinced her to turn down other offers, at least for now. For example, when offered the opportunity to work at the hotel switchboard, she decided to stick to cleaning, explaining, “I’m good at what I do and I have more of a chance of getting raises since I have been there a while.”

Politically active in her home country and beaten up by its corrupt government’s henchmen, Flo has had extensive experience identifying injustice and speaking out. She had always negotiated the terms of her work contract with past employers back home. Once in the United States, she pointed out her abuser’s exploitative practices on many occasions, even though her demands went unmet. And, after ICE informed her that they had lost her husband’s file, Flo wrote to Eleanor Holmes Norton (a Delegate to the U.S. Congress representing the District of Columbia). Flo took action without her lawyers explaining: “I wrote her because she is my Representative. She helped get the file opened the next month.” In short, Flo has a history of political consciousness and of action. Thus it was not surprising when her fellow classmates picked her to speak with the director of their nursing assistant training program. They had felt dismissed and demeaned by the faculty, one of whom would not answer their questions during class, directing them instead to look up the material in their textbook. Fed up, the students selected Flo as their spokeswoman to relay their frustration. “We were not learning what we wanted to learn,” Flo explained to me while lifting her massive textbook. “We all want to be the best nursing assistants we can be. But many are not passing the tests because they are not prepared properly.”
Esperanza too had experience making demands in her home country, Mexico, where she had tried to launch a woman’s textile cooperative. “There was a group of women, and we went to talk to our governor about the factory where I was working. It was really hard to get in to see him. There were guards protecting him and they stopped me and said, ‘No, you are not going to talk to him.’” She persuaded them to let her in to see him. He told her to write him a letter, which she did. “I wrote a letter asking him for the government to invest in the business.” Unable to secure any local investment, however, Esperanza took it upon herself to earn the money. “All I had was the dream, just the project in my mind. I had never been out of the country before. I thought I would go to the United States and earn enough money to start the collective.” Today Esperanza is an experienced, confident, and charismatic public speaker who presses for workers’ rights: “I think there is a lot of work to do. When I go to conferences [on trafficking] I learn a lot and I see that there is so much ahead of us. I learn from other activists, especially the ones at the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. They really listen to workers. We have a lot in common. We all have a lot of work to do.”

Speaking out has not always been easy. Esperanza recounts a story of attending her first conference, at which a Mexican official tried to chas tise and belittle her. “There was this woman from the Mexican government who didn’t know anything about trafficking and she wasn’t willing to listen. There were two of us survivors at the conference. She just judged us, everything we said. She asked questions that blamed us. She asked us things like ‘Why didn’t you go to the Mexican Consulate? Why did you go to the U.S. government?’ I told her ‘Because I don’t believe in Mexican law enforce ment.’ And I said that she did not understand trafficking and did not seem willing to learn about it. So how can they combat trafficking if they don’t know anything and they are not willing to listen to learn?” Esperanza continues to speak in a variety of venues, including legislative events and trainings for law enforcement. “Survivors have to tell law enforcement how to look for trafficked people. I speak for those who can’t.”

Sources of Inspiration

Esperanza’s experiences as an activist are rare, however. Few formerly trafficked persons attend antitrafficking conferences, legislative sessions, or other events such as those where Esperanza speaks. When it does happen, though, it can have a substantial effect on formerly trafficked individuals.
Even if the advice is the same as that of their social workers, friends, or colleagues, it can seem more within reach coming from somebody who has been through the same struggles. In these instances, the messenger can matter more than the message. In addition, having access to other formerly trafficked persons at confusing junctures can make a big impact, and can help them learn how to make demands in their current workplace and take steps toward more secure jobs. At a workers’ rights training, the woman I sat next to sucked in her breath when she realized that one of the other participants, a farmworker, had been in forced labor like she had. “Oh he was held,” she whispered.

Eva prepared to lead a workshop for Spanish-speaking trafficking clients at a social service organization in New York City. She wanted to inspire her fellow participants to draw on their own strength to hold on and to slowly take steps forward. “In the beginning you often think you are wasting your time. But if you take it step by step you can do it. It looks really hard and really big. But they will get help from the program—they don’t have to do it alone. I hope to let them know that if they were strong enough to get out, they can work to move further. I don’t want to talk about myself and say, ‘I did this, I did that.’ But we’ve been in the same situation. I was one of them before; I know how they think and what they say. If you work a little, you can pass through the situation. They may be younger or older than me. But it’s just time that everyone needs to get through. It’s effort and time. And dedication—to try to believe that they can do this.” Moving forward also involves risk-taking. “They have a fear of making mistakes. It’s hard to say yes again. Some want to do things almost perfectly. But of course, they may make the wrong decision!” Eva explains that she also will emphasize that she took advantage of any assistance offered, including training on how to be successful in interviews and write a résumé. “I’ll tell them that since I knew I wanted to keep on studying, I told my social worker. The organization paid for my course and computer classes. I’ll encourage them to ask for help and take risks.”

Esperanza dispensed advice to a fellow trafficking client at their social service provider’s office in California. “One day I was in the hallway and this client was talking with her case manager. She said she wanted to leave the shelter where she was staying, and that things
were really, really hard, and that she couldn’t see anything positive. When she went to the waiting area I asked her how she was. She told me, ‘Not good.’ I asked her, ‘Why are you so mad?’ I told her how lucky she was because she had support from the organization and was living in their shelter and did not have to worry about the house or food. Everything was free. I told her that I am living in my own apartment, but I have to worry about rent, about everything. She was angry with me and told me I was attacking her. But a week later I went to the shelter where she was living to see her. She jumped up and was crying. ‘Thank you, thank you, I just received my work permit.’ She explained that when I had seen her in the waiting room she was ready to leave the U.S. and go back to her country. She told me, ‘I thought I was the only one who had this kind of situation.’ I told her that all the clients that come here have similar problems.”

Julia did not know any other formerly trafficked persons, but she maximized the networks that she made through her work as a housekeeper in a senior living community. “While I was working there I asked the nursing assistants how they got their licenses. They told me what classes to take and what to do to get a license.” Julia set a course of study that involved a series of classes—English-language classes, classes to prepare for the GED, and courses to obtain a nursing assistant degree. She also took driving lessons. She explains how she developed her map for the future. “I do not know many people from my country. This is why I had to learn English. I had to rely on myself.” She also knew that she had to begin to trust others again: “I only had this organization and the other lawyers who helped me. I didn’t know too many other people. It is hard to make friends. It is hard to trust them. It’s hard, but I try.”

In spaces of exchange and energetic support, new and old migrants—some with a “trafficking” designation and some not—take inspiration and guidance where they can. Potlucks and other social events sponsored by community organizations can unintentionally turn into job fairs. At a regularly held Sunday potluck at a domestic workers’ rights group in the Washington, D.C., area, much of the chatter over lunch—before the official workshop theme of the day was under way—was an information swap about how to apply for jobs, the best kind of employer, and how to negotiate for better wages and working conditions. Other places where new migrants gather
also can become informal job resource centers. Calling them “lateral partners,” anthropologist Katherine Newman notes the benefits of “maintaining a constellation of friends” who can “facilitate movement from one position to the next and shorten spells of unemployment.”9 In the Washington, D.C., area, for example, Indonesian women meet one another at prayer services at the embassy and find out about child care jobs that become available. Those renting out weekend shares in apartments and those seeking a share (women who are live-in domestic workers during the week) also make arrangements at the services. In New York City, Filipina domestic workers’ rights organizations offer a wealth of information on jobs, workers’ rights, and how to make demands to secure those rights. Composed of new migrants and long-established residents, these organizations offer a large, experienced, well-connected, and passionate membership.

With limited social networks, and little time or money to learn new skills or to pursue new degrees, a focus on the future and formerly trafficked persons’ belief in themselves become sources of capital from which they can draw. But Gladys’s plans to open her own perfume shop and for her parents to open a restaurant also require significant financial capital. Julia’s and Eva’s courses cost money and time away from earning it. Julia almost never slept while working and going to school. Both Eva and Flo are clear that they never could have gone back to school if they had not been living rent-free (Eva with her brother, and Flo with her friends). Without family or friends to help out, Carmen has indefinitely shelved her dreams of attending school to work in a salon. She has not come close to saving enough money on her hotel housekeeping paycheck to cover the nearly $10,000 tuition.

Since not everyone can lead a workshop like Eva or testify in legislative settings like Esperanza, social workers and shelter staff help create other kinds of opportunities for formerly trafficked persons to pitch in and feel a part of a community. “We all have different roles. We all need our niche,” exhorts a staff member at a domestic violence shelter in Los Angeles. She offers the example of a quiet but powerfully steady and unflappable trafficking client: “Look at Carolyn. She may not speak publicly, but she gives so much support to other women.” A leader who does not take the lead, Carolyn’s off-stage mentoring—and remarkable compassion and kindness—make a huge impact in the lives of her fellow formerly trafficked persons.
Decent Wages

There are a host of vulnerabilities built into the kinds of jobs that formerly trafficked persons find in the low-wage market, such as child care, elder care, housekeeping, construction, factory work, waitressing, nail salons, and retail. Finding jobs that pay a livable wage is a constant challenge both for the most recent T visa recipients, as well as for formerly trafficked persons who have been in the United States for years. These kinds of insecure jobs rarely offer medical or other benefits. Nor do they offer opportunities to move into better-paying positions with greater security or the possibility to learn new skills. And it becomes all the more difficult to earn raises if one is frequently starting over with a new employer.

Social workers have counseled trafficking clients to not take jobs that do not pay well. But their clients often have few other options. “We give them T visas and then say, ‘Go ahead and make a life,’” an exasperated social worker in California explains. “Their desperation to work is so high, but their skill sets may not always be strong. So if a client looks for work in a restaurant, she very well may be offered a job below minimum wage. There are ten other people waiting to take that job. It’s hard to tell a client to not take this job and to hold out for a higher wage, which may be difficult for her to find.” She emphasizes what social workers report throughout the country: “My trafficking clients’ number one goal is to work.” But, “without the English language, education, and skills, they can only find low-wage exploitative work. Many will choose to go back to a situation of exploitation. What can we do? We tell them this is not legal and that these are sweatshops with exploitative conditions. They go to places like restaurants and get paid under the table. It’s a dilemma. But they see their larger community of co-ethnics is in the same situation.” For clients starting from scratch with no family or friends to help out, some pay is better than no pay. “If they do hold out for minimum wage and full benefits, they may be waiting a long time.”

Quitting is a huge risk. Dora was out of work for a year after leaving a job in child care. Relieved to be working again, she now is “afraid to ask for more pay.” “I can’t afford to lose my job.” Working for a family as a child care provider, she points out that asking for more pay requires “going up against your employer.” “You are alone in the workplace. It’s just you and your employer. And usually it’s you up against a couple!” A worker-organizer in the domestic workers’ rights community in New York City explains: “Even after the Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights passed, the culture
did not change. Workers are still afraid to report their employers. It’s a big challenge for workers. Not many cases have been brought forward.” Experts also let down workers. Social workers tell of battling with other social service organizations that have referred their trafficking clients to jobs, such as elder care, with no minimum wage and no system for documenting how many hours employees work. If they quit, as did a trafficking client in California who was not being paid minimum wage in a garment factory, they may decide not pursue any legal actions. This particular client did not seek back wages because a member of her coethnic community owned the factory, and she did not want to be ostracized.

An attorney does not mince words about the kinds of jobs her trafficking clients in New York City are able to find: “They take jobs that are on a road to nowhere. Like as a nursing assistant. You break your back for minimum wage. Some even pay around $350 to shady middle companies. They could be making more money and getting benefits at Starbucks!” In some job markets where there is a high concentration of migrant labor, the competition for jobs increases the likelihood of low wages. The options available for one trafficking client’s husband in California bears out the limits of the low-wage marketplace—even for migrants who have legal documentation. A U.S. citizen originally from Mexico, he has had little formal schooling. He worked in two different restaurants, essentially around the clock, cooking in one and washing dishes in the other. His wife explains, “He took any kind of job, like his dishwashing job. He is a hardworking guy. He does not care as long as it pays the rent.” While she attended a ged class after work, he went to his second job. “He thinks the same way as me about education. He would like to study since he does not want to always live like he is right now. He does not want to work and work and work and never enjoy life. If we ever have enough money to pay the rent and buy food, he would like to go to school and get a better education. He likes to study. He does not only want to live this life.”

Those working in the sex sector are among the highest earners. Since money often passes directly from the clients’ hands into the workers’ hands, women who had been in forced sexual labor knew how much money their abuser was making off of their labor. Some tell of being able to keep a portion of their earnings—just never enough to pay off the debt that their abusers kept on increasing. Since sex work requires a particular mix of moxie, resourcefulness, and independence, women’s experiences working in the sex sector may serve them well as they take new risks and set about building

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secure lives in the United States. Outside of work in the sex sector, few labor options pay well and are accessible to most formerly trafficked persons with limited language and other skills.

Getting Ahead

One solution is to generate income from as many sources as possible. In New York City, an attorney has several trafficking clients who have rented apartments with a number of bedrooms that they, in turn, rent out. They offer cooked meals for a fee, and some also babysit for their tenants’ children. Nanci and her husband became landlords out of necessity: by living with their two children in one bedroom and renting out the second bedroom, they were able to afford their relatively spacious New York City apartment. Liza, from Indonesia, also seized a similar entrepreneurial opportunity within her community of live-in domestic workers in the Washington, D.C., area. She rented out the beds in two bedrooms in a bright apartment to women during their time off on the weekends. She had been fed up with her poorly paid job as a live-in child care provider that paid $300 a week for workdays that started at 7 or 8 A.M. and did not end until 8 P.M. She had learned of the apartment through the network of women at the Indonesian Embassy. Explaining that few ever leave her rice-farming town, Liza sees herself as a risk-taker. She also describes her pursuit of more than one income stream as setting her apart from other women in her community: “They don’t mind living-in because it is easier; they don’t know this country or English very well.” She made gradual moves to greater economic security, first by saving all the money she could while still living-in and not paying rent. With her strong English-language skills, she eventually transitioned out of child care and now works as a hostess at a restaurant.

Generating more income by earning additional degrees means having the time and money to do so. Elsa, the African woman living in the metropolitan D.C. area who had exited forced domestic labor with the help of the coethnic radio personality, made course work a priority while she worked the night shift at a 7-11. After living in the United States for a few years, she had decided that without a GED and other course work, the only jobs available to her would be those like her current minimum-wage job. “I knew I had to get a degree. Otherwise I would always be working in a job like this.” Unlike Flo and Julia, who already were working in health care settings and asked work colleagues how to become a Certified Nursing Assistant, Elsa
did not know anyone working in health care. Instead she researched the degree on a school computer where she attended classes for her ged. She had earned a high school diploma in her home country in Africa and found the ged prep course relatively easy. But without documentation proving her degree, she worked the night shift so that she could go to school during the day.

Suzanne did not come to the United States with the same high level of schooling as Flo and Elsa. In Indonesia, she explains, “people don’t ever think about education. They don’t want to get an education and get a nicer job. They just think about money. They just want to work and work, and don’t care what kind of job they are working.” She was determined to make up the gaps in her schooling. “When you live in this country you know that if you want to have a better life you have to have a better education.” Her strong English-language skills made it possible for her to work in high-end retail, take courses in accounting, and learn how to use several computer programs. As an office manager, she learns new skills every day. Once her children are a bit older and more independent, she plans to get a college degree in night classes—while working full-time during the day.

Trying to move into better-paying jobs by learning new skills—either on the job or by enrolling in courses—can be particularly challenging for older formerly trafficked persons. Social workers have observed that trafficking clients who juggle work and school and homework generally are younger (in their twenties and thirties), like Flo, Eva, Elsa, Julia, and Suzanne. A social worker in New York describes, “Those in their early twenties are ready to go and try new things. Older clients are more cautious and lack confidence.” Maria, in her early fifties, has never seen school as part of her future. With scant educational opportunities for girls of her generation in the Philippine countryside, education was not part of her past either. As vulnerable as she is in an unprotected occupation, however, she describes feeling strong and self-reliant. By changing her extended family’s lives, she has tremendous social and economic status in the Philippines. The house she has built there, the investment in her son’s education, and the expansion of the family’s produce business guarantee Maria a secure place to live in the future. This is the retirement plan that she does not have in the United States. Thus the same jobs that allow formerly trafficked persons to just “get by” in the United States can put them in a position of considerable economic security and status in their home country.

At the same time that remittances build a secure future in formerly traf-
ficked persons’ home countries, they also are an immediate obstacle to anchoring their lives in their new country. They often feel compelled to show their family they are doing well and send hefty remittances as well as most of the money they may receive from civil awards. A staff member at a domestic violence shelter in Los Angeles explains, “Trafficking clients feel a lot of guilt for not being able to keep in touch [while they were in forced labor]. They know that their family’s needs back home are so great. They want to help out as much as they can.” A Chicago-based social worker similarly observes that “They are intent on remitting money. Even if they only make a small amount, it is incredible how committed they are to sending money back home.” With these kinds of obligations hanging over them, formerly trafficked persons frequently dedicate themselves to making as much money as they can from as many sources possible—even if it means working under conditions only marginally better than when they were in situations of forced labor. One young woman, stretched thin paying for school and all her own household expenses, sends regular remittances home to her family, against the advice of her attorney and social worker. They want her first to secure her own financial stability in the United States. Explaining that her family blames her for ending up in a situation of forced labor, she is eager for their approval. Other families, in the dark about their loved ones’ experiences in forced labor, remind them that they are lucky to be in the United States and have a financial obligation to them, who have been left behind. As far as these family members know, there is no before and after forced labor. They also may have little understanding of how hard it is to make significant earnings in the low-paying jobs available.

Remittances also can create unbalanced relationships, including cruel and perverse dynamics involving children. I have met several women from Mexico whose “husbands” (in consensual unions) demand remittances in return for letting the women speak to their children on the phone. In these cases, the men and their families have held the children for ransom. Using children as pawns is a tragic twist on the benefits available through the t visa. One woman explains, “My boyfriend is not cooperating with me and won’t let me communicate with my children, but the money I send is welcome. So when I can’t send it I feel badly. But another [trafficking] client told me that when she stopped sending money to her family they told her she could finally bring her daughter to the U.S. She told me if I do that he will say, ‘Oh, take your children with you,’ so this is why I am going to stop sending any money.” This other trafficking client who had given this advice
had been trying to reunite with her daughter who was in Mexico. Her husband’s family had refused to gather the documents necessary for the child to move to the United States with her mother. But once this client stopped sending money, her husband’s family said that she could take her daughter. “The child became a burden,” surmised the client’s social worker, when she “no longer was a source of money.”

Conclusion

Living in low-wage United States, most formerly trafficked persons are, at best, in a financial holding pattern. A domestic violence shelter staff member in Los Angeles relays a typical story of staying one step ahead of poverty: “What happens to them is classic: they only can afford cars that will break down. Or old tires. So they are always having car troubles. But they cannot afford any emergencies.” One of the residents’ father had just died, and she needed $200 to contribute to the funeral service. “If you are just holding on the edge, this $200 pushes you over. If you are just making it, you go into debt.” A formerly trafficked person in Los Angeles tells of having to pay $1,300 to get her boyfriend’s car out of impoundment. Yet another lives under a mountain of debt, over $8,000 for failure to make car payments after she and her husband divorced. She had no choice but to let the payments stack up: “It was either pay the rent or the car.”

As formerly trafficked persons throughout the United States recount similar stories from poverty’s edge, they explain that if they could endure their abuser they can handle a few bills. Their time in forced labor changed them; so too do their experiences afterward. The woman who paid for her boyfriend’s car is fed up with working more than he. This is not the first time she has bailed him out of debt, and she is on the brink of kicking him out. “I don’t want to take care of anyone anymore,” she says. Although battered by bills, debt, and obligations to send remittances, they nonetheless focus on the future. “I have opportunities here others from my hometown will never have,” Esperanza explains. “And I have my son with me now. Just the other day was his birthday, and he was crying. He told me he hated his birthday since it reminded him of all the birthdays we were apart.”

Esperanza and other formerly trafficked persons are realistic about what they can accomplish. Emboldened, inspired, and spurred on by fellow activists, Esperanza joins in workers’ rights campaigns, locally and nationally. At the same time she faces her own challenges paying bills and sending remit-
tances to her family in Mexico. “Sometimes it is very difficult, but we have to continue living.” Suzanne doubts she ever will own a house, but she has started a small college fund for her children. Maria waves away any concern about all that she lost in the fire. Instead she sets her sights on helping her family in the Philippines recoup after the typhoon. Finally reunited with her husband, and with her nursing assistance degree in hand, Flo still works the night shift at a nursing home. She kept their household afloat during the many months her husband was looking for steady work in construction after he first arrived. She sends most of her earnings to her family and puts some aside for college to study nursing. She knows her economic mobility will take time, and she is patient. Her income sustains so many in her family. This is success.