

Sari Lestari, SJI Survivor Consultant

Sari grew up in a small village in Indonesia, in a conservative household of generational farmers. Surrounded by open fields, she spent her childhood playing outdoors with cows, chickens, and friends. One memory she cherishes is using a large leaf as an umbrella during a rainstorm with her friends. Her early years were happy and safe, shared with her brother, parents, and extended family. However, as a teenager, her life changed when her mother left after her father's bankruptcy. Sari stayed with her father and continued her education. She later attended an international school in Indonesia, where she learned English and studied hotel management. During the program, she completed a summer internship in Singapore, gaining hands-on experience in the hospitality industry.

After completing her international school program, Sari applied the skills she had learned and began working at a hotel in Indonesia. In 2013, while working there, she met someone who became a close friend over the course of a year and a half. Unbeknownst to Sari this friend would later become her trafficker. Initially the offer from her friend sounded too good to be true. She presented Sari with a business opportunity abroad. She offered her a place to live and a chance to earn money by helping run an organic shop in the United States. After several conversations, Sari agreed to the proposal and agreed to come to the United States. She applied for a general work visa and was approved to move to the U.S. in 2015 with a sponsorship from her trafficker.

In December 2015, Sari moved to the United States with hopes of starting a new chapter through the business opportunity she had been promised. However, upon arrival, she quickly realized the reality was far different. Instead of managing an organic shop, Sari was first asked to work at a sex shop, which later became a lingerie store. The business arrangement she had agreed to no longer existed, and no housing was provided. Instead, Sari was defrauded into living and working inside the store.

The store had no bed, bathroom, or heating. Sari slept on the floor and lived in constant fear of someone discovering that she was living there. With no separation between her living and working space, Sari endured extreme hours at work. She would often work 12 to 16 hours a day, seven days a week. Her responsibilities ranged from opening and closing the store, stocking and merchandising products, managing operations, handling bank deposits, painting, and decorating. Sari essentially ran the business alone.

Despite her labor, Sari received no salary or hourly pay. Her trafficker only occasionally provides basic items like food or toiletries, Sari raised concerns but was met with threats. Her trafficker would intimidate her by threatening to withhold her passport and ID, repeatedly telling her, "Who would believe you?"

In April 2015, with the help of a concerned neighbor, Sari sought help from the Clovis Police Department. However, officers turned her away, stating that her case was outside their jurisdiction since the store where she lived and worked was located in Madera. A few days later, Sari then

contacted the Madera Police Department, but they were unresponsive and lacked an understanding of the dynamics of human trafficking.

Determined to find help, a couple days later Sari reached out to the Clovis police again. This time, an Officer visited her at her neighbor's home and listened to her story. Recognizing that Sari needed specialized support, the officer referred her to Marjaree Mason Center, a nonprofit organization that assists victims of domestic violence and exploitation.

At the Marjaree Mason Center, Sari was finally able to access critical support. The organization provided her with mental health services and connected her to the Economic Opportunity Commission (EOC), a local agency offering resources to individuals facing financial hardship. Through the EOC, Sari was referred to an FBI agent who assisted her in obtaining temporary work authorization in the U.S. for one year in 2016. However, securing immigration documentation took years. The FBI agent referred Sari to Central La Familia to start the process to obtain a T-Visa in 2017. Sari also filed a restraining order against her trafficker but felt poorly represented by her attorney and pressured to settle, resulting in no prosecution of the trafficker. Sari felt she was not adequately informed about her legal options both in the T-visa and restraining order process. Sari wished there was more accessible information and support for these difficult issues.

During this time, Sari also still lacked stable housing. She approached the city for Section 8 housing assistance but was placed on a long waiting list. During the interview process, she was asked, "Why don't you have any children?" This question left her feeling judged and discriminated against. Eventually, Sari secured temporary housing through an emergency shelter voucher, at a motel.

The EOC continued to support Sari by helping her obtain a human trafficking survivor certification, allowing her to apply to schools with access to financial aid. They also provided limited housing assistance, covering \$400 of her rent for ten months. Due to this support and her own determination Sari enrolled in Fresno State University. While at Fresno State University, Sari reached out to the university for another immigration law resource and was then referred to Immigrant Legal Defense ("ILD") in 2022. After being connected to LID, Sari was only able to receive her T-Visa in 2024, almost 7 years after she started the process. Sari credits her delay in obtaining the T-visa due to lack of resources and support. Despite these obstacles Sari graduated with a bachelor's degree in interior design at Fresno State University in 2023. After graduation, Sari attended Pepperdine University and received her master's in real estate Investment. Sari secured her license and now works in real estate. Sari's social worker at the EOC informed her about an opportunity at the Sunita Jain Anti-Trafficking ("SJI"). Sari learned about the practicum's initiative and was excited to work on influential policy initiatives.

Sari has witnessed the harms of the current policies for trafficking victims and hopes to advance survivor-led public health policy approaches that address the challenges she once faced. Sari feels passionate about issues involving housing discrimination and security for single survivors of

human trafficking, accessibility to basic legal and labor trafficking information, and an alternative response team for survivors of human trafficking instead of the police.

Sari would like policy makers to know that human trafficking is not as dramatic as what has been depicted in movies with force or kidnapping. Most often survivors are exploited by people they know. Immigrants are vulnerable to being exploited into labor trafficking due to lack of support, resources, and information. Sari would like to urge policy makers to create policy solutions for vulnerable populations in pursuit of justice.