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Shining Light on the Role of Drivers in Prostitution

By **CHRISTINE HAUGHNEY**

Sofia, a sweet-voiced and cherubic 24-year-old, was one of the lucky ones: She managed to escape much of the suffering shared by the millions of sex workers trafficked throughout the world, and even saw two of her traffickers forced out of the country and back to Mexico.

But the young woman said she still feels that complete justice has eluded her, because the drivers who ferried her from john to john, her de facto bosses, remain at large.

As prostitution has shifted off the streets and into hotels and apartments, the drivers who transport prostitutes have emerged as some of the industry's most powerful players. Sofia, who uses a pseudonym because she fears retribution from traffickers, said that when she was enslaved as a prostitute, her drivers organized her schedule, drove her to appointments and took half of her earnings before she turned over the remainder to her pimp.

"They are more important than the pimps because they're the ones who decide everything," Sofia said softly in Spanish. Her words were translated by a counselor and a lawyer from Sanctuary for Families, a nonprofit group that works with domestic violence victims. "I want all of them in jail, or back in their countries. I don't want to see them working like this."

On Wednesday, Sofia will testify, from behind a screen, before a joint hearing of the City Council's Transportation and Women's Issues Committees, on two pieces of proposed legislation that would penalize drivers who knowingly transport prostitutes.

The first proposal, introduced by Councilwoman Julissa Ferreras, would raise the fines on drivers who knowingly transport trafficking victims, and would direct the [Taxi and Limousine Commission](#) to add training for all its drivers on the subject of sex trafficking.

The second bill, introduced by Councilman James Vacca and Councilwoman Elizabeth Crowley, seeks to punish those who operate unregistered cars as liveries, with misdemeanor charges, fines

and possible prison time, noting that many of the drivers fail to register with the Taxi and Limousine Commission.

“Who would have thought that black cars or livery cars were going to become a point in the issue of sex trafficking?” said the Council speaker, Christine C. Quinn, who noted that this would be the Council’s fourth hearing on sex trafficking this year. “We have to hit every way we can to crack down on that effort.”

David S. Yassky, the chairman of the taxi commission, said he wanted to work with the City Council without adding costs for drivers. He suggested that the agency could issue a pamphlet about sex trafficking.

“I don’t know if we need full-blown classroom instruction on this particular topic,” Mr. Yassky said. “We would like to do what we can at the T.L.C. to make sure that car services, livery bases are not participating in reprehensible human trafficking.”

Reporting of sex-trafficking cases seems to be growing more frequent. Lori Cohen, a senior staff attorney with the Anti-Trafficking Initiative of Sanctuary for Families, said that the number of victims it advised had jumped to 293 in the 12-month period that ended June 30, compared with 85 in the previous 12 months.

Sofia estimates that she worked with 70 drivers, who brought her to 5,000 clients. Clients often found drivers’ phone numbers in advertisements placed in newspapers or on cards handed out on the street. When business was slow, her pimp would give her a list and have her call the drivers directly. Her drivers took more of her earnings if she did not finish her appointments within 15 minutes, she said.

Sofia said that the drivers rarely spoke to her, except when they tried to recruit her away from her pimp. “They promised us a better life,” Sofia said. “I know a lot of girls who said they left the pimp they were working with. In the end they just worked for the driver.”



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