SABBATICAL REPORT

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Project Title

"Bimodal Inquiry of Human Trafficking in East Asia and the Pacific: Criminological Analysis of Perpetrators and the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Detecting Employment, Romance, and Financial Scams in the Philippines" – with Dr. Claire Nolasco Braaten (Principal Investigator) and Dr. Young Lee and Dr. Daniel Braaten (Co-Principal Investigators)

The Problem

A job ad posted on Facebook for the position of customer service representative contained the following ordinary details: 13-hour work shifts with 1 hour break, basic salary starting at $700 increasing to $2500 based on performance, basic English communication skills and typing skills of at least 30 words per minute, age below 32 years old. Benefits include free accommodation and 4 meals provided daily by the company. The job ad, however, contained a couple of unusual conditions—first, employees "have to stay inside the company (sic) not allowed to go outside until contract complete" and second, "if terminate the contract by employer (sic) have to pay penalty" (Call Center Jobs Lahore, 2022, paragraph 2). For the more than 1,000 trafficked individuals of Vietnamese, Chinese, Indonesian, Nepalese, Malaysian, Burmese, Thai, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong nationalities rescued by the Philippine National Police at the premises of the Colorful and Leap Group Co. in Clark Sun Valley Hub in Pampanga, Philippines, these unusual work restrictions did not factor into their decision to accept employment positions with the company. The promise of decent jobs, the desire to be able to send money back to their families, and the stark employment conditions during the pandemic led them to accept offers of employment despite these red flags. The fake employment ads that lured them into being trafficked in the Philippines was the first step in a multilayer criminal venture that also forced them into being unwilling perpetrators of romance scams and cryptocurrency fraud globally.

Congressional hearings conducted by the Philippine Senate Committee on Women, Children, Family Relations and Gender Equality and with the Committee on Migrant Workers in November 29, 2022, January 25, 2023, April 19, 2023, and May 30, 2023 confirmed two modus operandi for perpetrators of the job scam engaged in the trafficking operations. For outbound traffic of Filipinos trafficked within the country for employment in Cambodia and Myanmar: (1) the victims' passports were stamped with fake immigration exit stamps in the Ninoy Aquino International Airport ("NAIA") or Clark International Airport through connivance with local immigration officials who had connections with the trafficker/recruiter; (2) exit points from the Philippines transpired either by plane through the NAIA or Clark Airport with the trafficker posing as an employee of airport concessionaires using fake NAIA permits to enter the airport or through boat ride from Zamboanga province to Sabah, Malaysia; and (3) several online platforms used were Wink, MeetMe, TextNow, Facebook, and Telegram. For inbound traffic of nationals lured into scam call centers in the Philippines, the modus operandi consisted as follows: (1) Philippine entry of nationals from India, China, and Taiwan through Section 9(a) tourist visa issued by the consulates of the Department of Foreign Affairs in their countries; (2) visa-free entry of nationals from Bhutan, Morocco, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand and Vietnam into the country under

Executive Order No. 408; (3) conversion of these entries into work visa; and (4) employment in heavily controlled and monitored compounds such as the scam center operated by the Colorful and Leap Group Company in Clark Development Corporation in Pampanga.

These trafficked individuals were then coerced into perpetrating romance scams and financial fraud online on individuals globally. As part of their work, they were also coerced to post fraudulent job ads online to recruit others into the operation. Coercive acts include actual violence or threats of violence, threats of being sold to other companies, docking pay for not meeting quotas, subjecting individuals to captivity and confinement, and restricting communication by confiscating mobile phones and monitoring their usage. Deception also played a significant role in the trafficking operation and in the subsequent romance and financial fraud scams. Perpetrators used fraud and deception to entice individuals with promises of favorable work conditions, high salaries, bonuses, free food and accommodation, and a range of job opportunities spanning from customer service to marketing. In the Philippines, these schemes targeted not only unskilled labor but also individuals with college educations, as the COVID-19 pandemic led to job losses and created a vulnerability to such promises. Social media has facilitated these practices.

Growing concerns regarding the proliferation of scam call centers in the Philippines and reports of trafficked victims have led to successful raids by the Philippine National Police ("PNP") in recent years. Notable examples in recent months include the detention of 2,724 people of Chinese, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Singaporean, Malaysian, Pakistani, Cameroonian, Sudanese, Myanmar and Philippine nationalities during a raid on several buildings in Manila where alleged trafficking victims were paid to recruit players for online games and the rescue of 1,090 individuals —389 Vietnamese, 307 Chinese, 171 Filipinos, 143 Indonesians, 40 Nepalese, 25 Malaysians, seven Burmese, five Thai, two Taiwanese and one from Hong Kong at Clark Freeport Zone in Pampanga province. Formal complaints were also filed at the Department of Justice (DOJ) against 12 "maintainers" of the company, consisting of seven Chinese nationals, four Indonesians and one Malaysian. In 2023, the National Bureau of Investigation ("NBI") and PNP investigated 277 trafficking cases and the government prosecuted 139 alleged traffickers, with 115 charged for sex trafficking and 24 for forced labor.

Outdated security devices and complicit immigration and airport personnel exacerbates the trafficking situation in the Philippines. In the NAIA and Clark International Airport, lax monitoring of entry and exit points enable unauthorized individuals to access areas that facilitate the bypassing of immigration checkpoints. The ID and security system and monitoring of both airports are also outdated, enabling traffickers to falsify IDs of airport concessionaires that allow their ingress and egress. Another issue identified during the Senate hearings is the inability of law enforcement to identify trends or patterns emerging among the perpetrators/traffickers due to the lack of intra and cross-border coordination among law enforcement agencies. The 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report on the Philippines, produced by the U.S. State Department, thus recommended the creation of a central database for information on illegal recruiters and human trafficking cases to facilitate interagency coordination in detecting, investigating, and prosecuting traffickers.

Project Description

The apprehension and prosecution of traffickers and the rescue of trafficked individuals in the Philippines create a unique opportunity to conduct research on their lived experiences. This five-year project aims to acquire a comprehensive picture of the trafficking operation through the following activities:

1. test the application of criminological theories to the trifarious criminal enterprise (employment, romance, and financial scam) by creating an empirical quantitative and qualitative profile of perpetrators and victims through multiple sources and methods, including interviews, official documents such as police reports and affidavits submitted to government authorities, and court documents;

2. using the Google Cloud Machine Learning Engine, conduct research involving data preparation, model development, training, evaluation, and deployment with an Application Program Interface to detect fraudulent job posts in East Asia and the Pacific using the Employment Scam Aegean Dataset (EMSCAD) which consists of 17,800 job ads posted between 2012 to 2014 through Workable, a recruiting software, whose 866 fraudulent job ads were manually annotated by employees of Workable;

3. utilizing Google Cloud Machine Learning Engine, conduct research including data collection, preparation, machine learning model development, training, evaluation, and deployment for real-time scam detection system to detect fake online profiles on Facebook, Wink, MeetMe, TextNow, and Telegram engaged in romance and financial scams;

4. build the institutional capacity of the Office of Legal Aid of the University of the Philippines College of Law to provide free legal services to victims of human trafficking and act as private prosecutors;

5. translate online ads and warnings (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and Linkedin), in native and vernacular languages, to alert the general public to false job vacancy ads in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma, Philippines, Vietnam, or other locations where scam centers operate;

6. coordinate with the Philippine Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking ("IACAT"), the Philippine Senate Committees, and other relevant authorities (NAIA and Clark Airport officials) to conduct an awareness raising campaign providing information on dangerous conditions and illegal work inside scam compounds with online social media posts; and

7. coordinate with the IACAT to create a central database for information on illegal recruiters and human trafficking cases.

Project Status

The project investigators submitted an application to the U.S. Department of State for a $2,996,384.00 grant to fund this five-year project funded. However, the grant application was not approved. This has delayed the full implementation of the project. Nevertheless, I spent my sabbatical in Fall 2024 re-establishing connections and working relationships with Philippine governmental and non-governmental organizations, which are indispensable for the successful implementation of the project (see number 1 and 6 of Project Description). Preliminary qualitative profiles of perpetrators and victims were also done through interviews and review of official documents (e.g., police reports, court documents). Once it gets funded, the project will be fully implemented.