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The “madam” is sentenced

Alejandra Gil controlled Sullivan Street for 30 years. She was known for being an activist that fought for the rights of sex workers but operated a trafficking network.

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Marisol and I met three years ago. Her story is long and painful as she was sexually exploited on Sullivan Street for 16 years. Marisol was enslaved at a time when people trafficking was not visible, there was no law to fight it and many politicians colluded with traffickers.

Three years ago, she wanted to take a drive on Sullivan Street. It was the first time she returned there, after escaping four years before. She was saddened to recognise several women, seeing some of them becoming madams themselves.

When she was 17 years old, Marisol worked as a nanny in a house in Las Lomas, belonging to a family I know. One day in December, Marisol was travelling to spend her holiday at home with her parents. A few steps away from the Chapultepec Metro, a man grabbed her forcefully and threw her into a van. She was first exploited in La Merced and she was soon asked to work on Sullivan without days of rest.

Since her body had not finished forming, the traffickers injected an illegal substance in her breasts and legs. Marisol remembers, with her eyes tearing up, how when she was discovered trying to escape, the pimp screamed at her that she had nowhere else to go, that she owed him everything. “I made you”, he would say.

Marisol became pregnant and she was only allowed to stop working during the last two months of her pregnancy. However, for each day she did not work, she would owe money to the traffickers. As soon as her son was born, he was taken away from her. That is when the problems with her body started and the illegal substances they injected in her began to destroy her. The following years were even worse. Between surgeries, debts and workdays of more than 15 hours, Marisol thought the end was near.

So that they would not get reported at hospitals, the traffickers returned her son to her. A customer had been trying to woo her for some time and Marisol, thinking she would not survive, asked him to take her son. On another day in December, after 17 years of slavery, that man not only rescued the child, but also rescued Marisol. To date, they are a family.

On Saturday night, Marisol visited Sullivan once again. On this occasion, she became a guide for three Mexican and two American NGOs. To commemorate International Women's Day, these organisations held a party-banquet for the women exploited there. The activists placed a table on a bay and invited the girls to have dinner. So that they would not be afraid of retaliation by their pimps, the volunteers gave women an envelope with money at the end. During an hour and a half, the girls had dinner, sang and danced, accompanied by a mariachi.

According to Marisol, most women on Sullivan are victims of trafficking. Traffickers break their spirit through constant threats and torture. They are even banned from communicating with each other. Thus, the dinner held by these NGOs was a valuable effort to bring hope and courage to the victims.

“This would not have been possible”, says Marisol, “if Alejandra Gil was free”.

Alejandra Gil is the woman who controlled Sullivan for 30 years. Politicians and the media knew her as an activist that fought for the rights of sex workers but, in reality, she operated a network that monitored the Sullivan victims for pimps. She was arrested last February, accused of people trafficking and, thanks to honest judges, her legal situation was defined yesterday: the "Madam of Sullivan" and her son, Omar Sayún Gil, were convicted.

Why should Alejandra Gil not remain free? Because, as Marisol explains, she had around 12 madams at her service, assigning each to guard a section of Sullivan Street. Thus, each of them had control over between 30 and 60 women. They wrote down the number of customers for each of the girls, warned pimps of suspicious behaviour or of customers who took too long or tried to talk. Alejandra Gil was the eyes of pimps and, in exchange, she received economic compensation from the fees charged to the girls.

Every night, Gil patrolled the area in her van and supervised other madams. On Saturdays, she earned an additional fee, from her organisation, of which the girls knew nothing. She also had direct control of a group of between 20 and 30 women. "All very similar," says Marisol. "Women with small bodies, almost girls".

Even though Marisol was delivered to a subordinate madam, Soledad Ramírez (murdered a few years ago), the presence of Gil is a constant in her story. She tells of how, when operations took place, the madam gathered the girls on pedestrian bridges to lecture them. "Say that you're here because you want to be", she instructed.

At Christmas or on Mothers' Day, when someone graciously came to offer them food or gifts, a threatening Gil would scare them away. Marisol even tells of how she once asked the "Madam of Sullivan" for help and she laughed. "She knew what we were going through and she didn't care", says the survivor.

Alejandra Gil was reported by two victims who did not know each other: one of them is the courageous Madaí, who is now an activist. For her part, Marisol participated as a witness in the case. The world on Sullivan is terrible but it was worse when Gil ruled it. There are still madams and pimps to be caught and it is important to raise awareness among customers but at least, now, there is a glimmer of hope.

Mafia authorities protected the madam for years. The situation changed with Miguel Ángel Mancera, whose government releases victims and locks up perpetrators every week. Gil's conviction is another success of his prosecutor's office. We would also like to thank the Clinic of Public Interest against People Trafficking of ITAM for the legal defence of Alejandra Gil's victims, through Héctor Alberto Pérez Rivera, who is also a defender of the No Going Back movement in the Law against trafficking.

Gil's conviction provides a clear message: Mexican justice will punish those violating human freedom and dignity. The times of change will come if our authorities fulfil their responsibilities and we, as civil society, demand that they do so vehemently.

It is now time to be unwavering and demand the application of the law from all political forces. We are grateful that, now, four of the 10 political parties (PES, PAN, Panal and PVEM) have signed an agreement to commit on this issue and secure the electoral process against the proceeds of trafficking. Some candidates to governors, mayors and delegates have given their word to have zero tolerance towards slavery.

Marisol recently told me something moving. "I feel sad but I also want to be strong and think this was a long dream and I am now waking up". Dear reader, we must wake up as well. If you know a victim, report it to 018005533000 or at unidoshacemosladiferencia.com. You could save a life and there are still madams to stop.

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