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Woman trafficked from India in arranged marriage, 3 face charges in Michigan

Updated: May. 01, 2024, 9:40 p.m. | Published: Apr. 30, 2024, 4:58 p.m.



A file photo of Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel speaking during a news conference Sept. 19, 2022. The AG's office announced human trafficking charges in a Three Rivers case. (Jake May/The Flint Journal via AP, File) AP



By **Brad Devereaux** | bdeverea@mlive.com

THREE RIVERS, MI -- Three people are facing criminal charges for allegedly trafficking a woman from India under the auspices of an arranged marriage and forcing her to work seven days a week for no pay, the Michigan Attorney General's Office reports.

Ikbal Singh Machhal, 40, Kartar Chand, 67 and Shila Devi, 66, of Three Rivers, were each charged with one count of human trafficking – forced labor and one count of human trafficking enterprise.

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Each count is a 10-year felony.

“Labor trafficking is a hidden crime that often goes undetected,” Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel said. “This woman’s existence was reduced entirely to service toward this business, and she suffered greatly throughout her years in Michigan.”

Nessel thanked the different offices involved for collaborating to bring the “horrible” acts to light, and helping to liberate the now 33-year-old woman from her own family.

Nessel announced the charges on April 30, along with members of the Three Rivers Police Department and officials from the federal Homeland Security Investigations.

The defendants allegedly began trafficking the victim in 2012, when they forcibly moved her from Pennsylvania to Michigan. That’s when her husband, Machhal, and in-laws, Chand and Devi, came to own the Broadway Market in Three Rivers.

After arriving in Michigan, the victim started working at the convenience store and allegedly never received payment for her labor.

The defendants are accused of forcing the victim to work eight to nine hours a day, seven days a week, against her will and upon threats of severe physical, mental and emotional abuse.

The AG's office alleges this went on for about eight years until the woman was able to leave her home with the assistance of the YWCA Kalamazoo and local law enforcement in October 2020, following domestic violence charges against her husband.

"This case highlights the fact that forced labor is an issue that can affect any community and we must all remain vigilant," Detroit acting Special Agent in Charge Shawn Gibson said, commending the victim for her bravery.

A civil case was filed in 2021 against the three people named above, which states the woman was married to Machhal. They have since divorced, the lawsuit says.

The lawsuit alleged the woman was forced to enter into an arranged marriage to Machhal in India in 2012, and they moved to Pennsylvania that year.

Signs of trafficking

Three Rivers Police Officer Matt Kilbourn uncovered the scheme after seeing signs of labor trafficking during a hospital visit with the victim, while investigating suspected domestic violence, the AG's office said.

YWCA of Kalamazoo helped her reclaim her life, as it provides services to victims of human trafficking, including legal assistance and support, the AG's office said.

“There is a community here at YWCA Kalamazoo and beyond to support labor trafficking survivors, on survivors’ terms,” said Susan Rosas, CEO of YWCA Kalamazoo. It includes housing, legal services and therapy teams.

“For survivors who wish to seek justice,” Rosas said, “this landmark case sends a loud message that justice is indeed possible in Michigan.”

Human trafficking is found in many different labor markets that consumers might not suspect, Nessel’s office said, such as convenience stores, nail salons, massage parlors, farming and agriculture and restaurants. People being trafficked often do not even realize they are victims of human trafficking or how to get help.

“Human trafficking is prevalent throughout the state of Michigan and often hides in places one would not expect,” said Assistant Attorney General Melissa Palepu, chair of the Michigan Human Trafficking Commission. “All too often vulnerable individuals are trafficked by those close to them, such as family and friends and their abuse is often hidden in plain sight.

That is especially true when it comes to labor trafficking, she said.

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Machhal and Devi were arraigned in the 3B District Court in St. Joseph County following their arrest by law enforcement officers from Three Rivers Police Department and Homeland Security Investigations on Monday, April 29.

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Machhal and Devi were granted bond in the amount of \$1 million. If they make bond, their passports will be confiscated by the court, Nessel said.



The YWCA facility at 353 E Michigan Ave. in downtown Kalamazoo, Michigan on Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2021.
(Joel Bissell | MLive.com) Joel Bissell | MLive.com

Chand has been charged, but has fled to India and was not arrested, the AG said.

They will appear at 8:30 a.m. May 14 in the 3B District Court for a probable cause conference.

In the civil case, the three people, as well as the business, the Broadway Market, were ordered to pay the woman a total of about \$866,000.

Nessel has not identified the woman.

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Victims of human trafficking can contact the National Human Trafficking Resource Center at 888-373-7888 or text 233733. The national, toll-free and confidential hotline is available to answer calls, texts and chats from anywhere in the country at all times.

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