



Feds break up global stripper smuggling scheme

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NEW YORK ([CBSNewYork](#)) - Federal authorities say they've busted a global underground immigration ring, and at the center of the scheme - strip clubs across Manhattan.

The feds carried out boxes of evidence from one Midtown strip club during an early Wednesday morning raid, dubbed "Operation Dancing Brides."

They said the club - Cheetah's - is one of several at the center of an underground immigration ring that stretches from Times Square to the heart of Russia.

"Today's arrests bring to an end a long-standing criminal enterprise operated by colluding organized crime entities that profited wildly through a combination of extortion and fraud," ICE HSI Special Agent-in-Charge James T. Hayes, Jr. told radio station [1010 WINS](#). "As alleged, the defendants controlled their business and protected their turf through intimidation and threats of physical and economic harm. Today, that business model has been extinguished."

Investigators said Russian and Italian mobsters were working together in the elaborate scheme to bring Russian and Eastern European women into the United States [and funnel them to strip clubs to work as exotic dancers](#).

"Control of the labor so to speak on the organized criminal entities from Russia and control of the marketplace with respect to the Bonanno and Gambino crime families," Hayes told CBS 2's Kathryn Brown.

More than two dozen men were arrested Wednesday, described as "ringleaders" of the operation.

Hayes said these men would pay people to "marry" the women on paper, making them legal. Then they would use the women as their personal profit machines.

"Per dancer, per night could have been hundreds of dollars," Hayes said.

It's unclear whether the women involved knew what they were getting into. The feds expect at least some will face charges.

However, Sonia Ossorio, the executive director of the National Organization of Women, said she suspects many of them were taken advantage of.

"They come here, they don't speak the language. They don't have a network of anyone and they're surrounded by very scary intimidating thugs," Ossorio said.

As federal teams cast a wide net around strip clubs and their owners attorney David Carlebach, who represents the Cheetah club, insisted his client's hands are clean.

"There is absolutely no 'La Cosa Nostra' as you say, connection," Carlebach said.

Those arrested have been charged with a variety of crimes - from visa and marriage fraud to racketeering and extortion.

Authorities said at least 150 marriages were arranged through the operation. Those involved in that have also been arrested.