



Ghislaine Maxwell: The harrowing testimony that brought her down

29 December 2021

ShareSave

Nada Tawfik
BBC News, New York



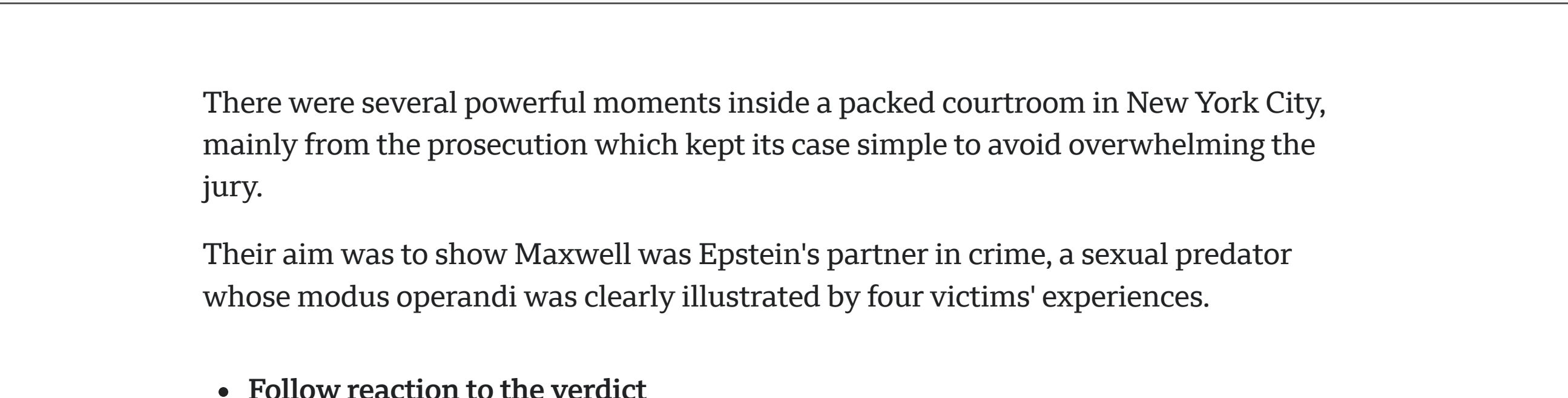
The first time I saw Ghislaine Maxwell, I followed her from the door of her luxurious brownstone down the streets of Manhattan, asking her about the horrific allegations against her.

Nearly a decade later, I saw her for the final time, in court and no longer able to run away from the truth about her life with Jeffrey Epstein.

This is one of the most high-profile convictions of a woman for enabling a sex trafficking ring.

And most importantly, it's a major victory for the more than 100 accusers who fought for more than a decade to have Epstein and his co-conspirators face criminal charges.

The 60-year-old daughter of a British media tycoon has been found guilty of grooming and trafficking girls as young as 14 years old for sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.



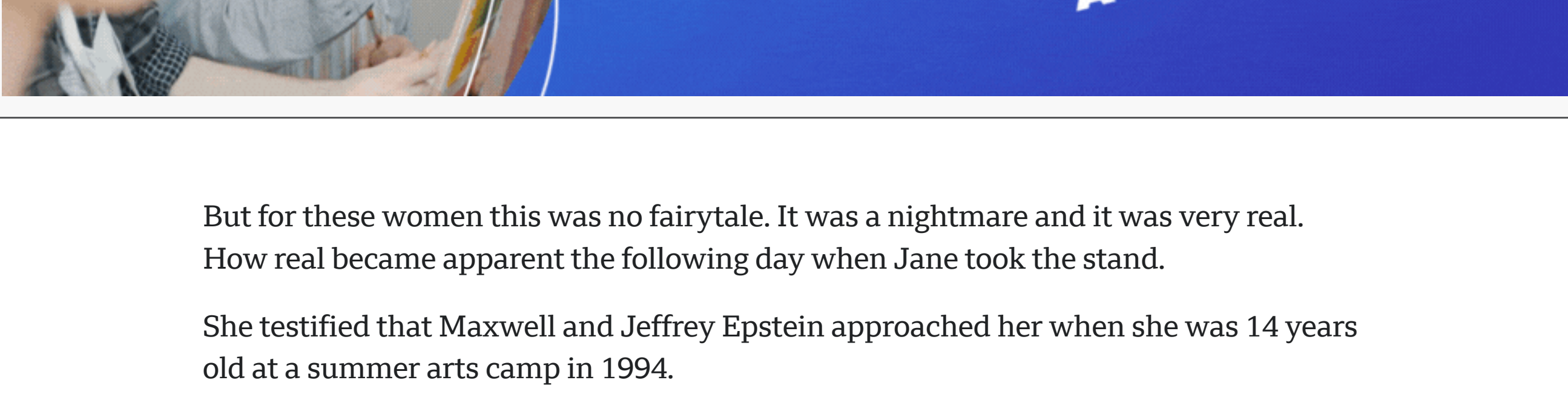
There were several powerful moments inside a packed courtroom in New York City, mainly from the prosecution which kept its case simple to avoid overwhelming the jury.

Their aim was to show Maxwell was Epstein's partner in crime, a sexual predator whose modus operandi was clearly illustrated by four victims' experiences.

- Follow reaction to the verdict

The prosecution's opening statement to the jury began with 11 words that sounded like the start of a children's book.

"I want to tell you about a young girl named Jane."



But for these women this was no fairytale. It was a nightmare and it was very real. How real became apparent the following day when Jane took the stand.

She testified that Maxwell and Jeffrey Epstein approached her when she was 14 years old at a summer arts camp in 1994.

Over the next two years, she said she was abused about every other week with Maxwell sometimes taking part. This was one of her key exchanges with prosecutors:

Q. What was Maxwell's demeanour like during these incidents?
A. I would say that it seemed very casual, like it was - like it was very normal, like it was not a big deal.

Q. And when she behaved like that, how did that make you feel?
A. Well, it made me feel confused because that did not feel normal to me; I'd never seen anything like this or felt any of this, and it was very embarrassing. You know, it's all these mixed emotions. When you're 14, you have no idea what's going on.

The other accusers would later recount similar experiences.

Maxwell argued she was unaware of Epstein's abuse

One of the most heart wrenching testimonies came from Carolyn, who testified under her first name.

The woman was visibly broken down by years of trauma and addiction to pain killers and cocaine. She had been raped by her grandfather at four years old, dropped out of school in the 7th grade, and was neglected by a mother who abused substances.

Carolyn told the court it was one of Epstein's most outspoken accusers Virginia Roberts, now Virginia Giuffre, that first told her at 14 years old that she could make money by massaging a wealthy friend of hers.

Carolyn met Ghislaine Maxwell when she showed up at Epstein's mansion in 2001. Maxwell, she said, told Virginia to take her upstairs to the massage room and "show her what to do." Prosecutors told jurors that by this time period, Maxwell had devised a pyramid scheme of abuse that no longer required her to personally find young girls for Epstein.

Instead, they would reward vulnerable girls who brought someone new with extra cash.

Carolyn was paid hundreds of dollars to "massage" Epstein on each of the over 100 encounters until she "became too old." She brought three other friends to Epstein. Carolyn said Maxwell once told her "she had a great body for Epstein and his friends" before touching her breasts.

The charges against her

Maxwell was convicted on five counts:

- conspiracy to entice minors to travel to engage in illegal sex acts
- conspiracy to transport minors with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity
- transportation of a minor with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity
- conspiracy to commit sex trafficking
- sex trafficking of minors

The teenage girls often came from troubled homes. Their families faced things like bankruptcy, substance abuse or previous sexual assault.

And even when they didn't, Ghislaine Maxwell and Epstein lured them in with friendship, gifts, and promises to help their careers or to pay for schooling. That "grooming" process, prosecutors said, was a key part of Maxwell's "playbook."

She then used the ruse of massages as an excuse to get the girls to touch Epstein and to normalise sexual contact. Prosecutors said Maxwell would walk the girls into a room to be molested and abused, and sometimes was present "to make it all feel normal and casual."

The two other accusers in the indictment were at or over the age of consent in the places the abuse took place, and therefore the judge ruled the sex acts weren't illegal.

Still, Kate going by a pseudonym, and Annie Farmer who publicly identified herself, were equally compelling on the stand to prove Maxwell's grooming tactics.

- Key moments from trial
- Who is Ghislaine Maxwell?

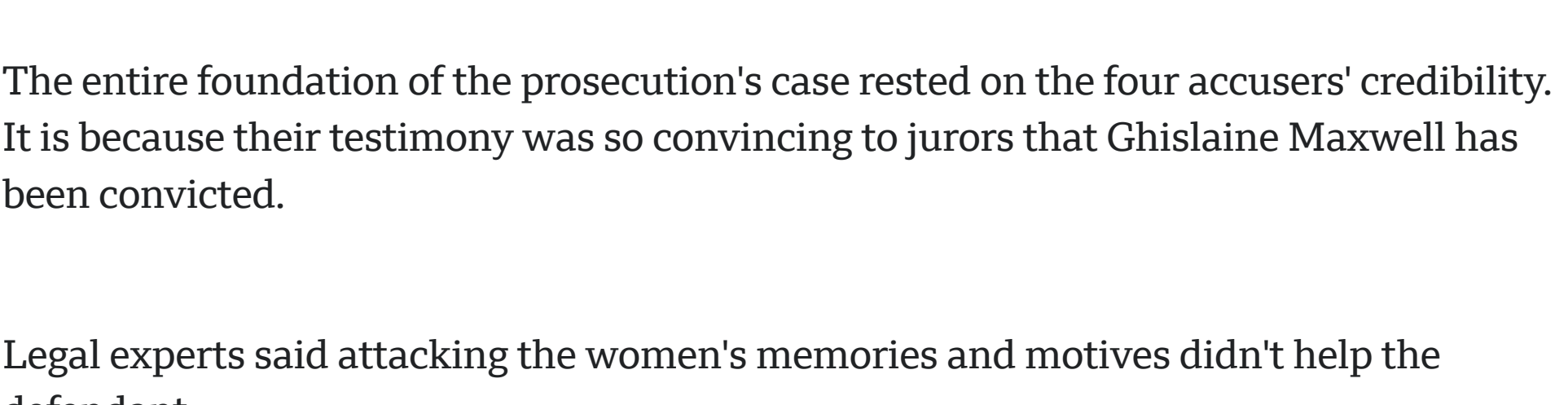
Ghislaine Maxwell's family had complained about her treatment in prison, saying it amounted to torture.

Nevertheless, in court Maxwell was an extremely engaged and animated defendant. She carefully studied exhibits, looked witnesses in the eye, and often passed notes to her lawyers to convey her thoughts.

She appeared to be in good spirits, hugging her defence team and blowing kisses and waving to her family in court.

Her steely defiance was best captured when the judge Alison Nathan asked her if she would testify in her own defence. Instead of responding to the judge with a simple yes or no, she stood up and informed the court that there was "no need" for her to do so because the prosecution had not proven its case.

Her defence case, in contrast, was less assured. Lawyers called on just nine witnesses over two days. Their strategy relied heavily on poking holes in the case brought by prosecutors, who bear the burden of proving the allegations beyond a reasonable doubt.



Watch: The secret lives of Maxwell and Epstein

The entire foundation of the prosecution's case rested on the four accusers' credibility. It is because their testimony was so convincing to jurors that Ghislaine Maxwell has been convicted.

Legal experts said attacking the women's memories and motives didn't help the defendant.

"Ghislaine Maxwell had the disadvantage of having to explain this parade of young girls who were coming in and out of the home daily underneath her supervision," says Mitchell Epner, a former prosecutor.

"She claimed she knew none of that. And when the jurors concluded that she was a liar, they concluded she was a predator."

- Ghislaine Maxwell 'won't get fair trial' - brother

One of the only pieces of physical evidence displayed in the courtroom was a green folding massage table taken from a police raid of Epstein's Palm Beach estate in 2005.

It was an attempt from the prosecution to remind police officer testified that they also recovered a box of sex toys.

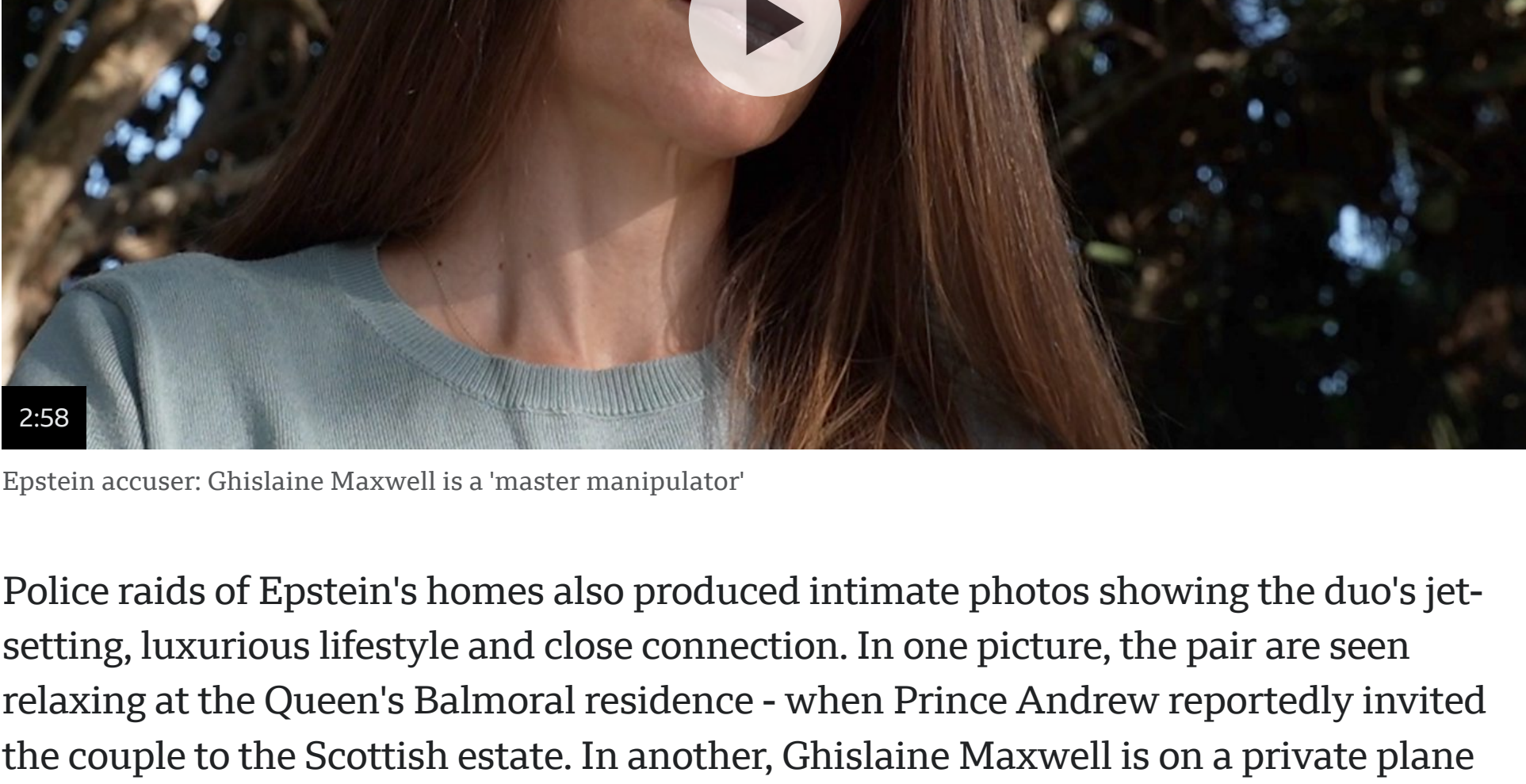
A hard drive recovered during a separate raid by the FBI of Epstein's Manhattan mansion contained emails sent by Ghislaine Maxwell to a staff member in which she complains that the house manager, Juan Alessi, did not tidy up Epstein's massage creams.

That led the police to Mr Alessi, who provided some of the most damning and X-rated corroborating testimony in the whole trial. Reporters covering the case had to hurriedly write notes to keep up with his startling revelations about the household.

He told the court that Epstein would have three massages a day. When Mr Alessi would clean up after, he would put the sex toys back where they belonged, in a basket in Ghislaine Maxwell's closet, off the master bedroom she shared with Epstein.

Mr Alessi said Epstein or Maxwell would sometimes direct him to contact and pick up young women for massages. He recalled seeing two underage girls that appeared to be 14 or 15 years old, Jane and Virginia Roberts. House rules, including in a 59-page manual, Mr Alessi said, told staff to be deaf, dumb and blind and forbade them from making eye contact with Epstein.

"There was a culture of silence. That was by design, the defendant's design, because behind closed doors, the defence and the prosecution were committing heinous crimes," Assistant US Attorney Lara Pomerantz said.



Epstein accuser: Ghislaine Maxwell is a "master manipulator"

Police raids of Epstein's homes also produced intimate photos showing the duo's jet-setting, luxurious lifestyle and close connection. In one picture, the pair are seen relaxing at the Queen's Balmoral residence - when Prince Andrew reportedly invited the couple to the Scottish estate. In another, Ghislaine Maxwell is on a private plane with Epstein, massaging his foot and rubbing it against her cleavage.

The staggering wealth on display from opulent properties in Palm Beach, New York and New Mexico only highlighted the vast power dynamics at play. The pair used wealth to lure and make young girls feel indebted to them.

Several witnesses, including the four women, recalled how the duo would name drop their friends in high places, such as Bill Clinton, Donald Trump or Prince Andrew, and display photos of them alongside the Pope John Paul II or Fidel Castro in their properties. None alleged any wrongdoing by Epstein and Maxwell's famous friends.

These connections proved to be no insulation from justice and the conviction is a significant moment for people who are often found at the other end of the social ladder.

"This guilty verdict is immensely meaningful to sexual abuse victims everywhere," said Lisa Bloom, an attorney for eight of Epstein's victims.

"No matter who you are, no matter what kinds of circles you travel in, no matter how much money you have, no matter how many years have passed since the sexual abuse, justice is still possible."

Jeffrey Epstein United States

RELATED

- Justice department official to meet Epstein accomplice Maxwell
- What do we know about the Epstein files?
- White House pushes back after reports Trump is named in Epstein files

MORE FROM THE BBC

- 35 mins ago

Benin names Spike Lee and wife ambassadors for African-Americans in the US
They are expected to support initiatives to reconnect African descendants with their roots in the continent.
- 48 mins ago

Four things we learned about Idaho murderer Bryan Kohberger from unsealed documents
The new details shed light on a murder case that has captivated Americans and shocked a small student town.
- 12 hrs ago

Assistant who accused Kanye West of sexual assault 'in hiding', lawyer says
The rapper, now known as Ye, has denied all her claims and says they are "fantasy fiction".
- 14 hrs ago

Columbia University to pay \$200m in settlement with Trump administration
The New York college becomes the first to agree to pay the Trump administration after it was investigated over campus antisemitism.

- 17 hrs ago

Philippines goods to face 19% tariff, Trump says
The new rate is higher than what Trump had threatened when he first unveiled sweeping global tariffs in April.