

# **Selected Case Studies on Forced Labor: Trafficking of Domestic Workers in the Philippines**

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## FOREWORD

The increasing global concern on the problem of trafficking in persons for the broad purpose of exploiting victims into forced labor continues to challenge many stakeholders until today. While there are existing international standards on trafficking which have gained massive national attention and actions that have brought significant impact in the ground, there is still a huge gap between trafficking and the understanding of the many modern faces of forced labor.

One of the many faces of forced labor that remain least understood is the exploitation in the domestic work sector. Domestic workers remain as one of the most vulnerable social groups that overwhelmingly face exploitation, discrimination, coercion because of its work nature and its close link to trafficking.

For the past 15 years, the Visayan Forum has come across many young women and children who were coerced, misinformed, deceived and made to suffer forced labor situation all in the name of domestic work. Many argue that hiring domestic work is necessary and as desirable as it is part of culture, yet the abuses and unfair treatment of the domestic workers, both here and abroad, are blatant and difficult to justify. In these modern times when governments and people put primacy to the principles of social equity and human rights as well as there is a renewed call for the rule of law based on social protection, we fear that we may be unduly leaving out the domestic workers' sector in the realm of neglect.

In the Philippines, there is a ray of hope for domestic workers brought by the popularity and public approval of a proposed bill to protect domestic workers. The **Batas Kasambahay** seeks to formalize the rights of domestic workers and set the parameters for their decent working conditions. In 2005, the Social Weather Station conducted a national survey revealing that 45% of the public is aware of the bill, while 9 in every 10 people strongly approve its passage. Yet there is an increasing frustration over the long-delayed passage.

In 2005, a National Domestic Workers Summit was held, a National Domestic Workers Agenda was developed and 1 million signatures in support of Batas Kasambahay were collected and submitted. But no single step has been made to move this bill in the national legislature. Policy-makers can still fast-track this bill, it is never too late because the public and the international community have already waited for the past ten years.

In this light, we offer this book to put a human face to the struggles of domestic workers caught in the grind of two connected social facts – trafficking for exploitation, and exploitation in forced labor. This book presents selected real life stories of domestic workers that show how they become trapped in the cycle of trafficking for forced labor. While many have fallen victims, there is much that can be learned from their strong personal courage to survive and empower themselves despite the odds. May their struggles and success likewise teach us and inspire us to help more domestics.

While the journey still remains long, let us work together to serve as the constant light to guide exploited domestic out the shadows. It is time to end the pattern of exploitation and neglect that have cut across generations. Together let us stand to make a real difference!

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## **INTRODUCTORY NOTES**

The Philippines ratified the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 29 on Forced Labor only in year 2005. The country has a lot of catching up to do with respect to the wide discussion and concerns in past decades. Nevertheless, the country has been involved in actions concerning slavery and servitude, specifically on the inter-related problems of trafficking and child labor.

While Europe has abolished its own trans-Atlantic slave trade in more than 200 years ago during the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the ILO began to propose ILO Convention 29 in the 1930's by defining forced labor as "all work or services which exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily." Using the same principles, the ILO again proposed in 1957 another convention, the ILO Convention 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labor, specifying that "forced labor can never be used for the purpose of economic development or as means of political education, discrimination, labour discipline or punishment for having participated in strikes.

Today, the problem relating to slavery and forced labor continue. The ILO estimates that as of 2005, there are still at least 12.3 million people worldwide trapped in forced labor conditions. Out of that number, around 9.8 million are exploited by private agents and enterprises – approximately 2.5 million of whom are victims of trafficking. ILO also says that that many victims of forced labour and trafficking are used either for commercial sexual exploitation or for economic exploitation. (*Source: ILO Force Labour and Human Trafficking: Estimating the Profits Working Paper 2005*).

Every year, private enterprises worldwide profit an estimated amount of US\$44.3 billion from forced labor, with some US\$ 31.6 billion of which coming from trafficking operations. More than half of the profit or US\$ 15 billion are made from people trafficked and forced to work in industrialized countries. (*Source: ILO Force Labour and Human Trafficking: Estimating the Profits Working Paper 2005*)

With these figures, the forced labor dimensions of the complex issue of trafficking must be seriously understood. It cuts across trade for sex prostitution, child labor, child abuse, domestic servitude, and abuse of migrant workers

In the Philippines, there are few data that show the link between trafficking and forced labor. Or at least, it is safe to say that few information on trafficking has been studied from the context of forced labor, or vice versa. One such least-studied exploited groups are domestic workers.

### **Situation of Domestic Workers**

Domestic workers are large in numbers, yet remain invisible and marginalized both economically and socially because of the myths still surrounding their employment. Domestic work is believed to be safest because they are working inside households and may get a chance for schooling. Most are girls and women who have low social status and among the lowest paid workers in the informal sector.

According to an ILO country study on domestic workers, estimates country range roughly from 600,000 to 2.5 million. The Labor Force Survey suggests that there are about 1.5 million household helpers working in private households in the country, contributing 13.73% of total wage employment in the private sector. The Visayan Forum estimates that there are at least 2.5 million persons employed as domestic workers, 1 million of which are children.

A large percentage of Overseas Filipino Workers serves as domestic workers. In 2002 alone, they accounted 22% of newly hired OFWs. From 2000 to 2002, there is an average of 67,694 newly hired domestic workers being employed outside the Philippines. According to unpublished data from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), 99% of new hires are women.

Because of poverty, many of them are lured to migrate to cities, provinces and other areas where there are

more opportunities to earn for themselves and their families. However, they are not aware of their rights, and thus, become vulnerable to illegal recruitment, forced labor including debt bondage, and trafficking.

Most domestic workers perform more than one role within a household and work for long hours but still, they remain underpaid and are often times abused. Even if paid, many are not covered by the Social Security System (SS) and Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (Phil Health). With too little or no pay or adequate compensation, many domestic workers have continuously fallen into debt bondage situation.

Many domestic workers are silent victims of verbal, sexual as well as physical abuse including confinement and lack of sufficient accommodation. Child and adult domestic workers also lack opportunities to complete their education.

They suffer very long working hours, and are always on call. They perform all-around chores, often with multiple employers. Most the domestic workers work away from home with out any protection and support. Isolated from family and peers, they rarely leave even when they suffer abuse.

They have limited days off and too little freedom for adequate time off and to transfer to other jobs. Performing all-around and chores, they are also expected to work until late in the evening. They have too little or no pay or adequate compensation. Many domestic workers have the continuous fall into debt bondage situation.

Around half of the country's local domestic workers work in Metro Manila, the nation's capital. They are among the 10 million people who flee the poverty, landlessness, joblessness and armed conflicts in the stagnant countryside. An estimated 200,000 of Manila's households constantly demand housekeeping services. These are mainly supplied by cheap and docile child domestic workers from Visayas, Mindanao and Southern Luzon provinces.

Based on VF statistical profile of rescued domestic workers in Metro Manila, there is very high incidence of

victims coming from the provinces of Negros Occidental and Oriental, Davao, (General Santos, Zamboanga), Cebu, Samar, Leyte and Bicol. The urban centers of some of these provinces also highly demand child domestics workers, as in the case of the chartered cities of Bacolod, Davao, Cebu, Iloilo, Batangas, Zamboanga.

On the other hand, high growth of medium enterprises Bulacan has fueled demand for domestic workers from neighboring provinces of Pampanga, Zambales and Nueva Ecija. The mining industry in Camarines Norte have also attracted young domestic helpers from Quezon, Bicol, Sorsogon, and Samar.

Overseas domestic workers from the Philippines face similar vulnerabilities and abuses. They live away from their families and work behind closed doors of their employers under absent working standards. When crisis strikes, they find it difficult to access outside help even from embassies because of their employers' right to privacy.

### **Context of Trafficking**

Trafficking is now recognized as a rapidly accelerating global problem, with high incidence of exploitation among women and children. Next to drugs, money, and arms, human trafficking is a very lucrative and profitable underground business because victims can be sold and used again and again. It also involves a broad range of occupations, with lower skilled groups being the most problematic.

In the Philippines, trafficking is considered a crime punishable to a maximum of 5 million pesos and life imprisonment, under RA 9208 or the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act.

Yet trafficking remains a very complex issue, which cuts across trade for sex prostitution, child labor, child abuse, domestic servitude, and abuse of migrant workers. Thus, present responses have gone far beyond just law enforcement, even transcending welfare approaches.

While institutions respond to the global nature of trafficking, they respond to it, first and foremost, as a national problem. It remains to be a national shame because of the failure to protect many women and children. They are sold, abused and stolen from their childhood. Even parents themselves fall victims to trafficking by selling their own children to traffickers and pedophiles. This problem, therefore, has historical and economic roots that cannot be easily solved.

The Philippines is a leading source of migrant workers scattered worldwide. According to the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, some **7.76 million** Filipinos are reported to be working abroad as of December **2003**. It does not include undocumented migrants, who are more vulnerable.

The Philippines is an archipelago connected by sea-lanes and bus routes. Around 5 million passengers pass through the Manila North Harbor alone. An average of 5,000 people daily also cross via inter-island ferries servicing strategic ports across the country. These ferry connections serve two main land routes that cut across the country: the traditional Maharlika Highway and the new Nautical Highway, which depends on the roll-on roll-off (RORO) operations of buses from Mindanao provinces to Luzon cities.

Locally, the precise figures of trafficking remain unknown, or guessed at best. According to Visayan Forum's database of victims rescued in major ports across the country, a huge number of our young girls are also bound overseas. Recruiters are organized to slip through the recruits towards Japan as entertainers, and Hong Kong and Middle East as domestic workers. Their victims do not have work contracts or any of the finer details about employment. They harbor victims in undisclosed training centers while arranging for visas and working permits. During their stay, the recruits are charged for all the expenses of the training, which will be deducted from their salaries when working abroad.

Many victims do not know that they are already being trafficked. Typical victims are 12-22 years old, mostly girls, first-timers in the big city, and are willing to take risks. They do not have clear information about their destination, work, and employers. Being young, they

easily fall prey to traffickers and even town-mates who usually promise domestic work. But many end up instead into prostitution and forced labor situation. Recruiters usually bring their victims in droves. Victims end up deceived and maltreated, or are sent to sweatshops. Many end up beaten as housemaids. Others are made ready, like bleached commodities, into the prostitution market.

Traffickers constantly change their methods. Surprisingly, there are still critical indicators to spot victims during transit. Traffickers tamper their victims' birth certificate entries, especially the dates of birth. They use "substitute" birth certificates, usually that of another sibling. Recruiters present expired licenses to justify the legality of their operations in the regions. They falsify work contracts, often using provisional contracts. While transporting big groups, recruiters instruct victims to disperse in transit points such as ports and bus stations to evade detection by authorities. They misinform, withhold information, and force recruits to declare false names and ages. They also warn the victims not to talk to anybody outside the group. Traffickers confiscate all contact addresses and telephone numbers the victims have during transit. They force the recruits to memorize their new names and ages and to rehearse a standard reply in case questioned by authorities. Usually, these victims are at the mercy and threat of traffickers because they have not, in the first place, informed their parents about going with a stranger, the trafficker.

Recruitment for work is a culturally accepted practice in many communities. Fueled by frustrations brought by poverty, lack of job opportunities, the conflict in the Mindanao areas, and the mere inability to continue schooling, young people easily fall victim to trafficking.

Trafficking involves an intricate network well placed individuals in source communities, transit points and destinations cities. It is well-entrenched syndicated organized crime. This network thrives from the unending supply of unsuspecting young girls from source provinces.

Different people are involved in different stages of trafficking. Recruiters, with the help of "headhunters,"

usually scout and screen prospective recruits in local communities. With their local contact and community stature, they convince parents to give their consent to minors. The headhunters pocket P500 to P1,000 per head.

Many recruitment agencies, even if they legally exist, are involved in illegal modes of facilitating recruits. During transit, traffickers employ transporters and fetchers, to ensure that the group reached their direct employers, placement agencies. Within the ports, there are freelancers who prey on lost victims. To pass through strict scrutiny of authorities, traffickers enlist the help of experienced document providers and well-oiled protectors.

### **Ground Responses**

As most of the cases presented in this book are domestic workers who were rescued by the Visayan Forum, it is important to discuss in brief about Visayan Forum work.

The Visayan Forum is a national NGO working to empower abused domestic workers, to seek justice and protection of trafficked persons, and to sustain development initiatives for children and their families. It started to seriously work on the issue of trafficking only more than five years ago, with the opportunity provided by the Philippine Ports Authority under its Gender and Development Program to operate four halfway houses for trafficked persons rescued in the strategic ports of Manila, Batangas, Sorsogon and Davao.

VF is a tax-exempt NGO also accredited by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) with a license to provide residential care for women and children nationwide. Today, the foundation operates through 6 regional offices including 9 project areas across the country. It has also started to set up specialized safe houses for victims pursuing legal cases against their traffickers. Together with multi-sectoral partners, VF guards choke points, transit points and hotspots especially ports and inter-connected land routes. These partners are convened under the Multi-Sectoral Network Against Trafficking a nationwide

alliance composed of partners nationwide including local executives, law enforcers, government social workers, and champions in the justice system.

To protect victim, VF specializes in providing a holistic set of direct services in port halfway houses which includes a package of safe-housing and sheltering, 24-hour hotlines, rights-based handling of survivors as well as data-basing of victims and traffickers' operations.

This work on trafficking works in tandem with VF's Kasambahay Program. The Visayan Forum Foundation, have been a forerunner in the issue of Domestic Work, specifically in women and children since 1995. The Kasambahay Program is VF's pioneering work on the issue of child domestic labor and domestic workers as a sector. The uniqueness of the program lies in the active involvement of domestic workers themselves in its implementation. The program provides specialized crisis services such as temporary shelter, hotline counseling and medico-legal services to reach out to abused domestic workers that are by nature scattered and invisible. VF also builds the capacities of partner stakeholders because it believes that no single institution can address the issue alone.

In order to improve the working conditions of domestic workers, VF and its partners have been lobbying for the passage and implementation of the Domestic Workers Bill or the *Batas Kasambahay*.

### **Protection for Domestic Workers**

The word "kasambahay" is a contraction of kasama sa bahay or partners at home to encourage domestic workers and their employer to embark on partnerships. Instead of the usual terms like katulong and maid, this term emphasizes this informal sector's positive role as an invisible engine of our economy, freeing employers to be productive outside their households while remitting much-needed cash to their poor families in the province.

The latest draft of Batas Kasambahay offers remarkable innovations to institutionalize the rights of domestic workers, to define decent working standards as well as

to propose practical measures for implementation. It proposes proactive role of local governments in providing services and local ways to settle disputes putting primacy on the protection of domestic workers while recognizing the rights of the employers at the same time.

VF believes that this legislation is timely, relevant and absolutely necessary. Last year, a National Domestic Workers Summit was held, a National Domestic Workers Agenda was developed and 1 million signatures in support of Batas Kasambahay were collected and submitted. But no single step has been made to move this bill in the national legislature.

There is an outcry for an omnibus law for domestic workers because concerned groups believe that present laws are incomplete, outdated and do not give enough protection to domestic workers. Noteworthy is the call of the International Labor Organization tripartite partners to put consensus building processes into a very certain conclusion.

The Labor Code defines "domestic or household service" as "service in the employer's home which is usually necessary or desirable for the maintenance and enjoyment thereof and includes ministering to the personal comfort and convenience of the members of the employer's household."

Some sectors believe that the phrase 'personal comfort' in this definition is too vague and too general, it creates different notions about the nature and scope of domestic work as allowed by law. For example, it is perfectly legal to force young girls to massage their male employers or become the object of sexual innuendos; after all they are defined as personal comfort.

In the existing law, the minimum monthly wage rate for domestic workers in highly urbanized cities is still 800 Pesos. Monthly wages for chartered cities is 650 Pesos and 550 Pesos for those in other municipalities. These rates are no longer at par with what many employers currently provide. More so, the law explicitly exempts domestic workers from benefiting from any law that increases the minimum wage of all workers.

Though it urges employers to “fairly and humanely treat their domestic workers,” the Labor Code also lacks specific attention to the already evident exploitative practices such as debt bondage and trafficking. Few victims also pursue legal cases because penalties for erring employers are said to be “soft.”

Once enacted, the Batas Kasambahay will bring this traditionally informal sector closer towards the benefits and protection accorded by law to the Labor Sector. Among the fundamental rights of domestic workers include the right to humane treatment, basic needs, security of employment, standard pay and 13th-month pay, prescribed hours of work, regular working days, protection for minors, membership to SSS and Philhealth, opportunities for self-development and to form self-help organizations.

One clear benefit that money cannot buy but the law should give includes the right to gain higher skills and education other than elementary education.

It must also be stressed that the proposed Magna Carta also protects employers by clearly defining the traditionally vague working relationship that exist in the home. Thus, contracts become indispensable tools to protect employers’ interests. It formalizes the terms of work the domestic worker’s job description and laying out the basis of termination serves as a disincentive for domestic workers to abruptly leave the homes of their employers without seeking permission from the other party.

Most importantly, there is an outcry for effective implementation. Scattered and outdated, the present Labor Code is hardly felt by the sector. Much wanting of national government response, it is through the pioneering efforts of local governments such as Quezon City’s creation of a Kasambahay Program and passage of an ordinance to register domestics that have inspired the other cities such as Makati and Iloilo to comprehensively institutionalize efforts at the local levels.



## Bars

Visayan Forum's social workers discovered Selma in a dark detention cell at the Manila North Harbor where she had been languishing for three months. Her employer filed a case of theft against her. Selma was not given any legal representation as required by law. She thought she would just rot in there for a long time.

Selma's ordeal started when an acquaintance introduced her to Sally, a recruiter who was going around the provinces in Mindanao looking for potential domestic workers in Manila. Sally paid Selma a visit and enticed her to come to Manila and work for a middle-class family. She agreed to take her offer. After six months of unpaid work, however, Selma contacted Sally again to help her find another job.

Sally referred Selma to another employer. For her next job, Selma not only served as a domestic worker but also as part-time cook and attendant in her employer's *carinderia* (small eatery)-cum-videoke bar.

Much to her dismay, however, her new employer didn't pay her, too, for three long years. Also, she suffered daily beatings for every mistake she made. At night, when male customers go to the bar to unwind and drink beer, her employer would force her and Tanya, her fellow domestic worker, to sit with and entertain them. "I didn't want to share a table with any of our customers but each time I'd refuse my employer would slap and hurt me. I couldn't stand it but she threatened not to feed us anymore if we don't obey her," Selma said in Filipino.

To make matters worse, her employer pushed her to cohabit with one of her co-workers, a houseboy who was wooing her. A few months later, Selma got pregnant. Her employer then made her do strenuous tasks, carry heavy objects and forced her to drink a bitter concoction, which induced a miscarriage. Selma kept on pleading to her employer to let her go so she could find better opportunities, but she remained stonehearted.

Her employer insisted that Selma still has to pay for the transportation expenses she shouldered when she first came to Manila. Desperate, Selma planned to escape together with Tanya.

But their employer learned about their plan and pre-empted it by accusing them of stealing P15,000. Selma and Tanya were taken to prison at a nearby police station. No lawyer came to represent them.

Selma and Tanya languished in jail for three months. When Visayan Forum learned about their plight, its social workers asked the police to release the two girls to their custody for the duration of the case hearings. The police, however, said that they were in the process of transferring the young women to the City Jail, so they could not release them. When their employer found out about the social workers' request, she decided to offer the young women a second chance, that she'll drop the charges if they will work for her again.

But Selma and Tanya rejected the offer. "I'd rather suffer in jail than return to the house of my cruel employer. At least no one would beat us up in prison and she can't hurt us here," Selma said. They spent the next four months awaiting trial. Afterwards, the case was dismissed due to lack of evidence.

After their release, Selma filed a case against her employer for violating RA 7610, the Anti-Child Abuse Law. After filing the case, she told the social workers that she wanted to go home to the province.

The social workers considered her request for repatriation. But since the hearings of the case required her presence in Manila, they urged her to stay. After a few weeks, Selma decided to leave the safe house and find another job. Both Selma and Tanya have settled down and are now based in Cavite.

## **The Box**

Maya served a household that lived in a six-storey apartment, but at night she slept inside an empty box.

The Visayan Forum first met Maya at the Manila Port together with other recruits from Dumaguete. The law enforcers suspected something fishy in their recruitment but could not verify any loopholes in their recruiter's documents. Maya's group briefly stayed at the Port Halfway House, but since the methods of the agency were perfectly legal, they were soon returned to the recruiter.

Three weeks later, Maya called the hotline asking to be rescued from her employers. "Everything just didn't feel right so I wanted to leave," Maya said while trying to hold back tears.

She was working then for a rich family in Paco, Manila. While her tasks were clear, how she was to be paid was not. Part of her job was doing all the ironing and laundry and daily cleaning of the six-storey house. She was given a small room to rest where an empty box served as her bed.

Maya tried to brave the conditions for at least a month. Her employers also did not allow her to venture beyond the gates. She was told not to talk to anyone –her friends, family or relatives – or even think of asking for help.

Once, when her employers left, Maya tried to call Visayan Forum's hotline, which she got from the contact card that the social workers in the halfway house gave her before.

VF immediately coordinated with the local police to check the veracity of Maya's call. But when they conducted an investigation, the employers denied that they have a domestic worker named Maya under their employ.

The incident drew the ire of Maya's employers who became more suspicious and watchful. But when they

went out again, Maya convinced her fellow domestic to finally escape. Once they got outside, she immediately called the VF hotline again.

The social worker who answered Maya's call instructed the two women to run to the nearest police station in Paco where she promised to fetch them.

Before going home to Dipolog City, Maya and her friend completed vocational courses at the Religious of Mary Immaculate (RMI) Villa Maria Social Center. She plans to find another job someday that is not related to domestic work.

Finally, Maya is living her life outside the box.

## **Calendar**

Wearing flashy jewelries and bragging about her connections with rich employers, Virgie found it easy to impress the parents of the two young girls, April and May. The parents were farm workers in a big hacienda in Hinobaan, Negros Occidental who were finding it difficult to feed their 10 children. It was already off-season in the sugar plantation and their debts were starting to pile up.

Virgie offered domestic work in Manila to the two girls. Each of them would receive P2,500 a month, get days off and go anywhere they want.

Although pleased with the offer, the girls' father was still reluctant because he knew that it would be difficult for his daughters to adjust to the fast life in the city. At the same time, he realized that letting them go would mean two less mouths to feed.

Moreover, the mother was well aware of Virgie's reputation in the community as a recruiter of Filipino entertainers for Japan. But Virgie was quick to dismiss her job's notoriety by bragging about the women she has helped to land jobs in Japan, who managed to buy appliances and build concrete houses for their families.

When Virgie came back the next day, she gave the parents a P1,000 advance payment and two calendars as souvenirs. The parents finally gave their blessing.

April and May couldn't sleep that night because they were too excited. Going to Manila had always been their dream, and getting hold of money for the first time in their lives would mean new clothes, cell phones and some remittance for their parents.

The following day, Virgie brought her new recruits to the Bacolod Pier where they would take the ferry to Manila. But the boat's departure was delayed until early the next day.

This gave Virgie the opportunity to brief the girls about some important things. She revealed that in reality each of them will only receive P1,200 a month because of the debts they had already incurred during the recruitment. For example, each of them had to pay back the P1,000 salary advance that was given to their parents. They would also have to shoulder their bus and boat fare amounting to P3,000. Finally, Virgie told them that she will have to take P1,000 from each of them as recruitment and finder's fee.

Surprised but left without a choice the two girls quietly accepted what they were told. Had they known early on about the scheme, they would have declined the sweet offer. Now, they are under Virgie's control because their parents had taken the money. They were already in debt.

The two girls' suspicions deepened when they were instructed to lie about their real age should authorities inquire about it. If anyone asked, they were to say that they were traveling together as relatives and going to Manila for a vacation.

They arrived at the Manila Pier without hassle. But when they were about to disembark, Virgie instructed them and the other girls to go out in pairs and said she would meet them outside the gates. The sisters noticed the strangers who were distributing contact cards and flyers together with the ship's crew members to disembarking passengers. They told the passengers to keep the cards and just call the hotline in case they would need help in the future.

The recruits regrouped in an eatery across the next street. Later on, a van arrived and brought them to a house in Cavite.

The house was called a training center. April and May met other young girls there who seemed like newcomers to the city just like them. Virgie gave strict instructions to the girls not to leave the house because she would not look for them if they got lost. The sisters became confused and afraid.

After a few days, April and May started to notice a pattern that every night, some of their companions

would be allowed to leave the house. A van would come to fetch the girls, then return the next morning.

But the sisters' fears seemed to disappear each time they were tasked to clean up the house with the help of other girls. They also cooked for the group during their month-long stay there. When they asked Virgie if they would receive any money for their hard work, she simply scolded them.

Because they already had a clue of what was going on, the two girls were not surprised when Virgie told them that it was their turn to do "another form of service." A new batch of young girls fresh from Surigao was immediately assigned to do the sisters' cleaning and cooking tasks.

April and May were taken to a place where they were forced to undress. Someone applied skin whitening creams to their bodies. Their eyebrows were also plucked and their hair dyed blonde. After their cleaning chores, they were told they were ready to start their dancing lessons.

During their dancing class, some girls teased them that they could start entertaining men who could pay them handsomely if they treat them nicely and manipulate them with some sweet talk.

Realizing that they were trapped in prostitution, the two girls pleaded to Virgie to let them go back to domestic work but they were simply ignored. One night, the girls were hoarded in a room and told to trim their pubic hair. Sensing the danger awaiting them and aware of the risks they would have to take, the sisters tagged along with some girls from Surigao for a chance to escape. They sneaked out of the backdoor, found an opening in the fence, and ran as fast as they could, dissolving into the darkness.

One of them hid in her panty the calling card that was given to them at the Manila Port. It bears Visayan Forum's hotline at the pier, which they immediately contacted. A few hours later, VF's social workers met the girls in a churchyard where they went to hide.

After another month of waiting at VF's safe house, the sisters finally went home to Negros. Although empty-handed and without any money, they were more than thankful that they were home and free.

**- ooOoo -**

## **Cradle**

Julia has jumped from one dangerous cradle to another. And for each attempt to seek safety and acceptance, Julia finds herself a victim of yet another abusive hand.

Upon being told by her parents that they could not afford to send her to high school, Julia, then only 13 years old, impulsively trusted and went away with a stranger. She went with a policeman who offered to help her find her auntie in Davao City as well as give her work referrals. But the policeman brought her instead to a secluded beach outside their town. When they got there, he took out his knife, pointed it at Julia's neck and raped her.

He threatened and ordered her to keep quiet and never to tell the authorities about the incident. But Julia found the courage to report the abuse to town officials who filed a case against the policeman. To her dismay, however, her mother settled the case out of court, opting to exchange her great loss of dignity for a P20,000 cash offer.

Fearing discrimination against the family, her mother eventually dealt Julia to a local recruiter seeking domestics for Manila. Julia was forced to go because her mother had already pocketed her P1,500 salary advance.

Julia and the other minors in the group quietly arrived and passed through the ports. They have been instructed to avoid talking to anyone while on board the ship. Prospective employers were already waiting for them at the agency's office in Manila. Like commodities for sale, each one was scrutinized by the employers and then taken away after the contract signing.

"My employer promised me that I will work just as a domestic worker, that all I had to do was clean their house. But when I got there, I did more than just clean their house. In the morning, I'd wake up at around 6 am and do the laundry until 9 am. By then, I've already finished cleaning the house and taken a bath. Then, I would man my employer's hardware. I carried cement

bags, plywood, [boxes of] nails, and even steel gates. I was also tasked to fix the lighting and the extension wires. We would close the hardware at around 8 pm. Then, I'd go back to the house and clean it up again and after that I'd take care of the elderly until 3 am. I only get to sleep between 3 am to 6 am," Julia gasped.

She also had to endure constant verbal abuse. Her female employer labeled her "*tanga*", (foolish) "*gaga*" (stupid) and "*kulang sa turnilyo*" (nutty). "It was painful for me, especially if she would say demeaning words, foul words. Everyday, she would tell me that I'm crazy and stupid. I couldn't take that. But since she kept on saying that every day, I got used to it. Whenever they beat me up, I just cried in a corner. I dared not show them that I got hurt for what they're doing to me. At first I really couldn't take what they're telling me, but later on, I just accepted that I'm crazy and stupid," she said in Filipino.

Her physical beatings also became habitual. Once, her employer's daughter hit her with lead pipes and sometimes they would kick her for no reason at all.

"My body became numb, I didn't feel any pain at all," she cried. "Although I wanted to complain, I couldn't leave because I owed the agency a certain amount of money that I had to pay. I had also signed a contract," Julia said. Moreover, she hasn't paid back the P1,500 cash advance that her mother took during the early stage of her recruitment.

"The hardest thing was being in an unfamiliar place where you don't know anything about and when you get to your workplace you're not sure what will happen to you, like what happened to me. I stayed there for one year and served my employer. I was trapped inside; I couldn't go out. I also didn't have any money. I was not paid even a single peso. They didn't pay me at all. Every time I would ask my employer when I could get my salary, she would say that she will think about it. For more than a year, I kept telling her that I'll just run away. She gave me P7,500 pesos for one year of service. She deducted everything that I ate, the toiletries I used—shampoo and soap—and my snacks from my pay," she said.

Despite knowing the risks involved in escaping, Julia decided to flee. While her employer was out, she ran away and went straight to the police. The law enforcers referred her to Visayan Forum where she was placed under protective custody for three months.

Julia's aggression toward her mother and other siblings was a central topic in each of her counseling sessions. "When I was alone I thought that I had no one to support me and sympathize with me. They were really harsh and mean to me. I would send letters to my mother but I got no reply. I wrote her three times but she didn't answer my letters. So I stopped writing to her. I lost hope that I could still get out of my employer's house," she recounted.

After three months, Julia told the social workers that she wanted to be with one of her sisters whom she found out was also working then in Makati. Her stay there, however, was cut short when her sister took a tempting job offer in Saudi Arabia.

With a heavy heart, Julia transferred to the house of her other sister with whom she didn't get along well. They often argued, which prompted Julia to run away without exactly knowing where to go. Confused and frustrated, she just rode a bus bound to Batangas.

She found herself in Batangas, another unfamiliar place where she met a woman named Marcia. They became fast friends and soon Marcia arranged Julia's employment as domestic worker in her uncle's house. It would have been an ideal cradle for Julia, but one night, Marcia's uncle came to her room and raped her. He threatened her and told her not to tell anyone about it. The following night, he assaulted her again.

Julia fled once more and sought the help of the local social workers' office that informed Visayan Forum about her case. Visayan Forum soon regained custody of Julia. Despite the assurance that the organization will back up her pursuit of justice against her abuser, Julia still refuses to press any charges. She wants to overcome the trauma, live a normal life again and eventually fulfill her dreams.

"I dream of finishing my studies and after that I want to be a soldier someday. That's what I want to achieve," Julia says.

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## **The Contract**

For Clarita, the contract was heaven sent. It included a P3,500 monthly salary, plus bonus and Social Security System (SSS) benefits. It also mentioned something about vacation every six months. Just for signing the contract, Clarita can also get P1,000 in advance from her first month salary. Surely, Clarita thought, her employer must be very kind.

A single mother who raises three children and can barely read nor write, Clarita could not find any other tempting offer. She lives in one of Cebu's growing slum colonies. Since her husband died a year ago, she has eked out a living by servicing households in adjacent subdivisions. She worked as a stay-out laundry woman and was paid in piecemeal. But it is not everyday that she is asked to come over to wash clothes, so it is not everyday that she brings home some cash. She could not even afford to buy milk for her three babies with the money that she was earning.

One day, she decided to try her luck in Manila. She was enticed by a newspaper ad that says, "YAYAS, HOUSEMAIDS FOR HIRE." She left her babies to her mother-in-law to work in Manila, just like what countless other mothers have done before her.

The first contract that she signed after talking to the recruiter was difficult to understand. The agency told her that in order to facilitate her employment, they would charge her P4,000 for her boat fare and recruitment fees. She could already leave P1,000 to her kids as advance payment of her salary. Clarita did not bother to ask about security benefits and days off anymore because she thought she would not be going anywhere in Manila anyway.

But Clarita found her second contract a bit odd. The salary was slightly smaller, P3,500 a month but it included SSS benefits.

She worked for a couple who were also raising three children. They reminded her of her three children that she left behind. Her new contract also allowed her to

take a vacation every six months. The P1,000 advance payment earlier given by the recruiter was also stipulated in the contract.

Clarita shared the task of caring for the house and the children with another domestic worker. But at first, the division of their tasks wasn't clear. The two domestic workers soon sorted out their tasks upon the decision of their employer's wife.

The wife, however, turned out to be very strict and would nag Clarita for every minor mistake. She would summon her endlessly for every repetitive task and small errands, starting at 4 am. Clarita would cook, clean the house, and bathe her wards before sending them off to school, which must all be done before the couple leaves for office work.

The other domestic worker washed and ironed the clothes. Clarita and her companion not only shared tasks but also strictly rationed food and toiletries.

To their surprise, Clarita and her co-worker were soon conscripted to serve the parents and other sisters of their employer who lived in a different house within the same compound. While the workload increased, the rest periods were set aside, and Clarita no longer had the energy to think and write back home.

For three months, Clarita endured every sacrifice just to pay off the debts she incurred from the recruiter. She had no money left to send back home for her three children. One day, she tried to ask a small advance payment from her employer just to be able to remit money to her children. Her request was ignored. She tried to wait a little bit more hoping that they would change their minds but it didn't happen.

Shackled to her daily routine, disconnected from any information about her children, Clarita just kept on thinking of her family at home. One day, she met an old friend and a town mate at the market and learned about the tragic news: her mother-in-law had been looking for her for months because her youngest child has died of pneumonia.

Freaking out and still unable to control her emotions, she immediately negotiated a two-month salary advance with her employers. They granted her a P4,000 emergency loan which she immediately sent home. Expecting that Clarita would go home, her family strongly warned her not to leave her job. But Clarita, who was still grieving for her child's loss, decided to just run away.

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## Diploma

Lani wants to prove that chasing a dream to finish school might be difficult but it is within reach. A working student who graduated from a public high school in Batangas City, Lani had to endure long periods of separation from her family and a life of subservience as a child domestic worker. Without the support from fellow domestic workers, she would have less the courage to hurdle every challenge along the way.

"I want to uplift our status as domestic workers. People should not look down on us. They should not humiliate us just because we are domestic workers who always obey orders. We also work hard and so we should be treated as kindhearted people who help employers in their daily lives," Lani said.

Ever since she could walk and carry a basket, the diminutive Lani had been selling vegetables in the barrio. She used her money for her school projects and to buy uniform. Her parents were caretakers of an undeveloped land at the foot of Batangas mountains. Their house was burned down once so they started all over again by planting root crops, vegetables and coconut trees. There was no irrigation in the area, but there was a small creek that drew water from a mountain spring during the rainy season.

Immediately after graduating from grade school, Lani decided to enter domestic work. She was just 12 years old then. "I needed money for my (high school) studies because my parents' earnings from selling vegetables was just enough for my siblings. I had to go away and work. My parents could not help me so I found a way to help myself so that I could continue my studies," says Lani, the eldest daughter in a brood of seven.

Lani first worked as a nanny to the four children of her father's friend in their village. But after six months, she left for Batangas City where she took care of an elderly. She heard about a high school classes offered at night and she enrolled herself to the program.

"At first I found it difficult to get along with other people. I was also not used to difficult work without (enough) rest period. It was also tough to be away from my family. Sometimes when I got sick, I couldn't even rest because I was embarrassed to ask for a break. There was just too much work to do. So in school, I couldn't concentrate because I would get sleepy. (Instead of going out with classmates after school), I preferred to stay home and finish my work. I didn't want my employers to lose their trust in me," she says.

With enough patience and good advice, Lani got her high school diploma. But there was no clear path to college after graduation. "Getting a college degree requires higher fees. My parents could not afford to help me. So I decided to find work and save enough money to get back to school," she revealed.

Combining work and school was a tough challenge. Lani was aware of the hurdles she had to overcome.

"It felt different to be with other people, to live in an unfamiliar house with strangers. I missed the time I had with my family. I missed being able to make decisions for myself and hanging out with my friends. You're free when you're with your family," Lani shared.

One time, her sister got sick so she asked permission from her employer to go home so she could take care of her. Her employer disapproved her request and asked her instead to take care of her children and continue doing her other tasks. "She got mad at me and told me that she hired a domestic worker so that someone would take care of her children. She wanted me to always obey her orders," she remarked.

To survive, Lani tried to look for a kinder employer. She found one who treated her like her own niece. Lani calls her "*Tita*" (Auntie) and she has been working for her for almost 10 months now.

"I am free when I am with her. Whenever I would ask permission to go to my parents, she would allow me. I can always ask for anything I need and she would give it to me. She gets worried when I get sick. She always takes care of me. She is kind. I will never forget her," Lani beams like a child who found a lost mother.

Lani found time and space to participate in SUMAPI activities under the Batangas chapter. SUMAPI members teach their fellow domestics on computer literacy. "I learned a lot about computers. I learned how to design and how to layout text and drawings. I'm happy (because) it made me think faster. That helped me in my studies," she said.

SUMAPI emphasizes and relies heavily on the members' collective and inner strengths. Lani reflects on what she gained after joining the center for domestic workers: "I met many friends. They gave me advise me and informed me about my rights. They were there when I had problems."

Lani dreams of becoming a nurse and going abroad so she can support her family. "I just really want to find a way (to succeed). Sometimes I think that I don't have parents and I ask myself why it happened to me, why they were not around when I needed someone to guide me. But later on, I understood that it was because of our poverty and that it serves as a challenge for me," Lani ended.

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## Fire Extinguisher

Rhea's nightmares continue to burn her soul. She has finally returned home to Sta. Fe, but she still wakes up in the middle of the night, shouting and screaming out, "No more!"

In the adjacent town of Sagkahan, Che quietly sits in front of their *nipa* house. On her lap she cuddles her youngest nephew who is only four years old. She stares blankly across the distant rice fields. Like Rhea, she is back home, but her mind is still somewhere else.

Like an unextinguished fire, trauma haunts the two girls. Their mothers have tried asking them about the scars in their arms and bodies but the distant cousins would just say that what is important is that the scars do not hurt anymore.

Rhea's father died when she was only seven. To earn her way through school, she worked for her teachers until she reached fourth grade. Her mother had remarried, while her brothers were supporting their own families. She dropped out of grade school and took a step further by working in Sagkahan, earning P700 a month as a domestic.

Che, 17, about the same age as Rhea, was also born to a poor family. One day, her mother consented to her plan to venture in Manila as a domestic worker.

The two girls' paths crossed when they both landed as domestics in the same household in Manila. Rhea was recruited by the brother of her sister's employer. Che and Rhea became fast friends and soon found out that they were distant cousins. Each trusted the other like blood sisters.

"We were all-around domestic workers. Our employer was very strict. She didn't allow to have days off. And every time we ask for our P1,000 salary, she would say that half of that was already sent to our parents in the province and the other half covered the soap, shampoo and toothpaste that we used, as well as our share in the

electric bill when we watch TV. We never received any salary," Rhea explains.

Every time their employer would leave the house, she would lock the doors and gates from the outside. She would put chains in the outer side of the grills and then padlock everything. She didn't want the two girls to get acquainted with the neighborhood. No one knew that the girls were being maltreated.

Moreover, the cousins couldn't comprehend why their employer would always punish them. "She would pull my hair and then bang our faces against the wall," Rhea says.

When their mistakes became more frequent because they became more nervous, their employer devised creative forms of cruelties. "She would ask me to kneel on a stool or over some scattered mung bean seeds then order me to balance a fire extinguisher through one outstretched arm," Che said while demonstrating the punishment.

Both girls had to endure different types of beatings all over their bodies. "Sometimes, when our employer was tired, she would force one of us to beat the other. I couldn't take that kind of cruelty. It was then that we realized that our only choice was to escape," Rhea cries.

They tried to escape twice but the door locks proved difficult to break. One day, when their employer was out for a medical checkup, the moment the girls had long been waiting finally came. They forcibly unlocked the chains by using a pair of small scissors.

Once they were outside the gate, they ran as fast as they could until they reached the barangay hall to seek help. The official on duty was aware of the bad reputation of the employer among the villagers, so he believed the two girls' tale. He hid the girls in a parked jeepney and called the Visayan Forum hotline that he saw on the news.

VF gave shelter to the cousins. During the medico-legal examination, the doctors from the Philippine General Hospital noted signs of hematoma in the arms, legs and

back of the girls. VF helped the girls file a case involving child abuse against the employers.

Because the preliminary investigation was moving slowly, the two girls asked that they be returned home to Leyte before the hearings begin. The cousins got their wish.

When Rhea turned 18 a few months later, she decided to return to work in Manila. She thought that since she's no longer a minor, maybe she would be able to make more well-informed decisions on her behalf. Che, on the other hand, decided to stay home for awhile; she didn't inform the social workers about her cousin's trip. She tagged along with her mother who worked as a stay-out laundry woman for houses near their community.

Rhea landed as an all-around domestic for a Chinese couple in Manila who owned a grocery. Working alone, she would start cleaning and cooking at 4 am, then by afternoon she would tend the store until past midnight. She would work even on Sundays because the store hardly closed.

Her employers would accuse her of stealing some goods in the grocery. "Every time I would miscalculate the change to the customers, my employer would curse me. He would always accuse me of stealing food from the store. And all the opened food packs in the store and overpayments I made were all deducted from my salary," she narrates.

Rhea felt that aside from the verbal abuse and accusations, the physical beatings would soon follow. Before long, the slapping and beatings happened to her once more. So she decided to leave.

She contacted the VF once more and stayed in its safe house for the second and longer time. Soon after, she volunteered to become an advocate for the rights of domestic workers. She loved expressing her experiences through the arts. She was also able to enroll in a non-formal education that gave her the opportunity to be a part of the formal work force.

The case that Rhea and Che had filed has not reached any definite conclusion. Rhea went home but though her

nightmares come in longer intervals, they still could not be extinguished.

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## **Flat Iron**

The brown mark on Amy's right arm constantly reminds her that life's problems cannot be easily ironed out. She was just 16 years old during her ward's birthday party when she survived the heat of the burning flat iron pressed against her arm.

Amy's childish mirth and stubbornness hides her life's deep scars. She was only 14 when she left her grandmother's care. She's never been inside a classroom; she only had the love of her grandmother who lived in Catubig, Northern Samar.

She was convinced by Rowena, a distant relative and trusted neighbor, to work as a maid in her house in Sta. Rosa, Laguna. Amy have always wanted to go to Manila because she thought that one can see movie stars there everywhere, and one can even end up working in their households.

Amy served eight other members of Rowena's family, including her bedridden mother. She cooked breakfast as early as 4 am; then, she would accompany the school-age children to school. She would pedal a three-wheeled bike loaded with all the children and the bags and books they were carrying, which Amy also dreamt of using someday.

Returning from her school trip by 8 am, Amy would single-handedly serve those who were left in the house. She would do the laundry, clean the house, wash dishes and do every odd job until lunch time when she would cook and serve the family again. She continues to maintain order in the house until late afternoon when she would fetch the schoolchildren again. By night, she would be too exhausted to take a bath that she would wake up the next morning wearing the same clothes as the day before.

Being a servant of a household with nine members was not easy. Amy says that she was always treated like a slave who was expected to fearfully obey orders without complaint and immediately punished for every slightest mistake. One must always be on guard to respond to

every whim of the master, she recalls, as if you do not have a mind of your own. She was already 16 but was treated like an ignoramus (*kulang-kulang*). She hated her kinky hair because her employers always made jokes about it, that it's proof that she's from an indigenous tribe from the mountains.

Amy would later on forgive her employers about the beatings and verbal abuses that she endured. "I pity my employer's five kids," she said without any hint of bitterness. She decided not to file any child abuse case anymore against her employers. But she has not forgotten the constant hurting.

"They always accused me for stealing every missing item in the house. They didn't trust me because they think I'm stealing money to buy some candies," she said. She still remembers the sweetness of the candies and chocolates she dreamt about during her toughest times, a dream that kept her going.

Once, she was accused of stealing money. When her employers could not find the missing things in her room, they made her choose between two methods of punishment. "Eman, my employer's nephew, offered to either hit me in the face or strangle my neck until I confess," she said.

Amy didn't always like Eman because he was supposed to take care of Rowena's ailing mother which she ended up doing herself. He was not nice to her from the start. His creativity in subjecting her to practical jokes that bordered on cruelty never seemed to run out. Amy never fought back; she was no match to his strong built.

It was during the birthday of Rowena's daughter that their silent war turned out dirty. They were all preparing for the party then. Amy was told not to touch the lemons inside the refrigerator for it would be used for the *pansit* (noodle dish) that will be served in the party. While Amy was ironing clothes, Eman got some lemons and used it to clean his fingers without her knowledge. Amy politely asked Eman why he used the lemons. She got the most unexpected reply—a strong press of the burning flat iron on her right arm. Traumatized, Amy sought the help of her employers but they did nothing.

They didn't even bother to bring her to a clinic for some medication.

Amy only drew strength from the thought that she would earn some money for her grandmother as a reward for her patience. Her salaries were sent directly to her parents in Samar that's why she didn't receive them regularly. But when she talked to her mother over the phone, Amy found out that her parents have only received a measly amount of P2,000 for her almost one year of service.

"I never got hold of any money or salary," Amy tearfully recounts. Later on after her rescue, she would single-mindedly pursue her complaint at the National Labor Relations Commission to claim unpaid wages.

Her patience snapped when Rowena didn't allow her to go home for her grandmother's wake. She had an element of hardheadedness that made her decide to escape.

Luckily, Amy met good Samaritans who gave her refuge for a few days. A vendor introduced her to another employer within the village. They took Amy in for three days before calling the Visayan Forum hotline. The marks in Amy's body were also later on examined by PGH doctors.

Amy stayed at the VF shelter for three long years. During her stay, she became a very active and cheerful advocate of domestic workers' rights. She enjoyed the games and group activities because finally, she knew how it felt to belong, to learn from others, to be respected for one's painful past.

By the time she won her salary claims and returned home, Amy was not ashamed anymore. The flat iron's burn marks in her arms have finally disappeared.

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## Medicine

At the young age of 14, Elisa was no longer a stranger to domestic work. She had been working for other families far away from home. Thus, going to Manila offered a big chance to earn more than what she was receiving then.

The second in a brood of seven and the eldest girl, Elisa made a sacrifice by discontinuing her studies. Her younger brothers also dropped out of school to help their mother earn a living by being baggage carriers in a nearby market,

Elisa first worked as a domestic in Marawi City, a few hours from home. She didn't stay there for a long time. Her father would always worry about her because she was sickly. Elisa was forced to come home when she was hospitalized for three days.

A recruiter, who was a distant relative and town mate in Iligan City, paid them a visit once. She enticed her and her cousin, May, to work in Manila. May decided to go so that she could watch over the younger Elisa. They traveled for long hours to reach Manila. Their prospective employer, who also hailed from the same province, decided to accompany the girls herself so that the port authorities would no longer question Elisa's age.

When Elisa started working in Manila, her employer gave her a P1,500 monthly salary, which was less than the P2,000 promised to her. May's salary was even got half less. Both girls shared the cooking, cleaning, dishwashing, laundry and ironing tasks. For no extra pay, they also cleaned the house of their employer's relative.

At first, the employers were kind to the cousins. After two weeks, their treatment of the girls suddenly changed. "They would humiliate us with vicious words, especially if other people were around," Elisa recounts.

Their female employer often called them, "*Hoy, mga burikat! Malalandi!*" (Hey, flirts!) Her ringing yells meant

that Elisa and May had to run to ask what she wanted them to do. If they were too slow to react, they would expect harsher reprimands throughout the day. "Her husband also made it a habit to slap us, punch us and kick us," says Elisa.

Despite the increasing insensitivity of their employers, Elisa and May continued fulfilling their jobs, which usually started as early as 5 am. They were permitted to sleep only after midnight, when the employer had nothing more to ask from them, long after the children had all gone to bed.

Overworked and fed meagerly, Elisa got sick. Although she wasn't feeling well, she was still forced to work. "They didn't allow me to rest because they couldn't get a replacement. I asked for medicine just to control my fever but they didn't give me anything. I was forced to carry on with the usual tasks or face even greater punishment," Elisa explains. She was lucky that her cousin May was around to nurse her at the height of her fever. Elisa recovered without any medication.

But after that, Elisa became sicklier. Three more months passed before the cousins finally decided to leave.

One time, when their recruiter called to check on how they were doing, they told her about their complaints. Upon learning that Elisa was sickly, the recruiter immediately came to visit them in Manila. She secretly told them what to do when they get the chance to escape, where to go and the directions they should take.

Their employers somehow became suspicious. But a smooth escape came within their reach when they were instructed to clean their employer's other house in Marikina. When the jeepney driver learned of their ordeal, he himself assisted the girls in getting to the bus terminal. One of the bus conductors there gave them a free ride to Pasay and instructions on how to reach the address their recruiter told them to go. It turned out that their recruiter directed them to her own relatives.

May was able to go home right away because her mother bought a ticket for her. But Elisa had no ticket so had to stay behind. They went to the shipping companies to seek help. One of the shipping companies

they approached referred them to the Visayan Forum while they were arranging for their discounted fare.

Elisa stayed at the VF safe house for sometime because it took a while to request VF's partners to shoulder their repatriation. While she was waiting, she developed new friendships with other trafficking survivors who encouraged her to actively participate in SUMAPI.

Elisa became a strong advocate for the provision of medical benefits and social security to domestic workers. She went home after joining the National Domestic Workers Summit last September 2005.

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## **Native Tongue**

Minda was only 12 years old when she left her home in Cotabato. She only knew how to speak Tausug, has never ventured far from home and been to places where people speak a different language. But when her cousin, Ahmid, invited her to take the chance to go to Manila to work as a domestic, she immediately agreed because she wanted to help her struggling family.

Ahmid and Minda left Cotobato City and traveled all the way to Manila without any hitch. They told their families that they were going just a few cities away, to Marawi. Minda's father didn't have the slightest idea that they were going further up north, thousands of miles away.

They both started working for a Muslim couple in Sta. Cruz, Manila. Ahmid, however, left a few weeks after and Minda didn't hear from him again. In a place where she barely knew anyone and hardly understood and spoke the language, she found herself helpless and trapped, unable to interact with anyone beyond the gates. Yet she thought that it would be easier to adjust because her employers spoke her own language.

But her work failed to meet her expectations. Each day turned out to be a constant struggle: she worked alone, did all-around housework and was denied the opportunity to rest. She was only 13 years old at that time, taking on adult responsibilities more than what her young body could take.

Since her employers knew that Minda couldn't speak Tagalog and was unfamiliar with the city, they didn't give her any day off. Minda reluctantly agreed but felt like a silent prisoner of the house, a prisoner of her own tongue.

As months passed, her working conditions worsened. For no clear reasons, her employers would lock up Minda inside the house every time they would leave. "Maybe they don't trust that I can watch over the house and prevent strangers from sneaking in," she thought.

Soon she realized that she had become an unwilling prisoner. Her employers would harshly scold and punish her for simple mistakes. They would berate her, insult her, and laugh at her for being an ignorant, provincial girl. In the end, they did not pay her salary at all nor give her any allowance.

Just when she thought she had enough pain, Minda's worst nightmare occurred one night inside her room. She woke up horrified, realizing that a man was touching her private parts. She recognized the man to be the brother of her female employer. The man easily forced himself into the helpless and frail girl.

The following morning, she told her employers about the abuse but they just scolded her and ignored all her cries. Minda thought she'll go crazy. To survive the trauma, she decided to forget all about it. She told herself that she was young and perhaps her frail body will not get pregnant anyway. All she wanted to do was to escape from the place and so she devised a plan.

But she had to set aside her plan because her employers developed their own tactics. They threatened to file a case against her for allegedly stealing P7,000 cash from their vault. She strongly denied the allegations but her thousand sobs fell on deaf ears. Minda was kept behind closed doors for weeks.

Minda's resolve grew each day and she prepared herself to bravely take the first opportunity to escape. But every time she thought of running away, she was always overpowered by fear brought by lack of contacts and unfamiliarity with the city. She knew that her brother Dante was working somewhere in Metro Manila, but she didn't know how to get in touch with him.

One day, when things seemed to have settled down, her employers ordered Minda to run an errand outside the house. She mustered all her guts to approach a neighbor and told her about her ordeal. The neighbor took pity on her and immediately brought her to the barangay official.

The Visayan Forum learned of Minda's escape through Bantay Bata 163, which the local official contacted. A medical examination done by the Child Protection Unit of the Philippine General Hospital confirmed that Minda

had been raped. She underwent a series of counseling and processing sessions to help her cope with the sexual abuse.

During her first few weeks at the VF safe house, Minda was pale, thin and weak, and would always sleep the whole day. She preferred to be alone and rarely socialized with the other victims. Eventually, she regained her confidence through regular counseling, processing seminars and listening to similar stories of abused domestics. She eventually became an effective counselor to other victims.

Through the help of social workers, Minda traced the whereabouts of her brother Dante, who was then working in Payatas. Dante decided to file a case against their cousin Ahmid. Meanwhile, Minda went home to Cotobato City under the supervision of the local DSWD in Region XII.

Now, Minda sees to it that she learns new Tagalog words every day so that she can help prevent other women from ending up in the same fate.

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## **P500**

Elena was just 15 years old when her parents traded her for P500 to a recruiter in Misamis Oriental to work in Manila. She didn't want to go but her mother had already used the money.

"The recruiter gave my mother P500. I wasn't aware of their transaction. I refused to go to Manila with the recruiter but my mother said she had already spent the money. I was crying because I had no choice," Elena says. She is the oldest of four children born to a farmer who could not afford to send them to school. At 13 years old, she started working as a domestic in Cagayan de Oro City.

A woman transported Elena and the other child recruits by land and sea to hide the children. The recruiter went ahead by taking a plane.

Elena took her first job in Manila as a family cook. But she couldn't cope with the task so she was returned to the agency.

Then, Elena worked for two months as an all-around helper for a couple in Pampanga. Her male employer was a policeman, while his wife managed a gasoline station.

One time, her female employer took her child for a vacation in the U.S. The husband stayed behind. He immediately abused Elena the night his wife left. "It was 12 midnight. I was sleeping in my room when he knocked, saying I must iron his police uniform. Then when I opened the door, he got in and locked it right away. He pointed a gun at me. He also held a pair of scissors. I tried to fight back but he was a huge man and he threatened to kill me. I pleaded and even knelt in front of him. When it was over, I cried and begged him to 'Please bring me back to the recruitment agency. I will not tell anyone,'" she recounts. In response, he cut strands of Elena's hair to prove his power over her.

It was not the first and last time she was violated. The sexual abuse continued for quite sometime. "I found myself always crying. I just wanted to go home even if

it meant I'd have to forget this nightmare," she said while staring blankly at nothing.

Elena was eventually brought back to the recruitment agency. She immediately told everything that happened to the agency owner. But when she asked for help, she was told that since she was no longer virgin, she might as well be a "sex worker." Elena was furious. She met another recruit from Cebu who urged her to escape. Elena did exactly just that, but she remembered leaving behind two other recruits.

Elena was found aimlessly roaming at the Manila pier. When a Visayan Forum social worker asked her where she was bound, Elena answered, "To Cagayan de Oro. Maybe someone will take pity on me and allow me to go on board (the ship) for free."

Elena was invited to stay at the VF safe house for a certain period. The social worker convinced her to undergo medical examination to help her file a case. The doctors found evidence that she experienced blunt force or penetrating trauma.

But before she could pursue her complaint, the recruiter filed a case of theft and estafa against her. While this case was eventually dismissed, Elena took it as a serious threat not only to her life but to her family as well because the recruiter knew where to find them. So she decided to go home to her family.

Before Elena left, a broadcast journalist became interested in her case. Elena gave the reporter the recruiter's name and the agency's address.

The agency owner granted the reporter an interview. When confronted about the case of Elena, the owner was aghast. She threatened to file new charges against Elena. She said that Elena had to prove that she was raped. She also denied that she was going around the provinces to recruit girls, and that she wasn't interested at all in employing minors. She even claimed that once, when her agent brought some minors to her agency and the police questioned her about them, she immediately verified the recruits' ages. When she found out that they were indeed underage, she claimed to have told her agents, "You know my rules. I never take in minor

workers.” Then she claimed she handed over the minors to the police.

The owner denied having any recruit who was sexually abused. When the reporter started to mention Elena, who sought the owner’s help but was told to just become a sex worker as she was no longer a virgin, the owner flatly denied any knowledge of the story. She said on camera, “I will challenge whoever said that. That is a lie!”

Later on, when the reporter showed to Elena the footage of the interview with the agency’s owner, Elena positively identified the woman as her recruiter. She even knew her full name and correctly pointed out some identifying marks on her face.

The reporter helped Elena to fulfill her wish to go back home to her loved ones in the province. “I really wanted to go home. If no one helped me, I would have just tried my luck at the pier,” Elena sighed.

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## Soap

Marinela, the youngest of three children, grew up in a small village in Negros Occidental. Her mother died when she was only seven years old. After sometime, her father, who was a farmer, remarried and sired three more children.

Marinela tried an easy way out of poverty. She left her family and went with her distant auntie to be a domestic worker in Las Piñas City. She planned to work there for only a year, hoping to save enough money to support her studies once she returns to the province.

The 13-year-old-Marinela learned the ropes from her aunt, a seasoned domestic helper. Marinela had to do the laundry, clean the house and take care of a child, all for the sum of P1,000 a month. Her aunt treated her well like her own child.

Marinela's only problem was dealing with her employer's nephew who was into drugs. He also fancied her a lot. One time, he even tried to rape her but she repelled his attack by grabbing a knife. He threatened to kill her if she ever told anyone about the attempt. Marinela decided to just run away.

She managed to get some help from the other domestic workers whom she met at the school of her employer's child. They referred her to another employer.

In her new workplace, Marinela had to cook, wash and iron clothes, clean the house and take care of a 9-year-old child. She was promised a salary of P2,000 a month but they never paid her a single cent.

Marinela's 9-year-old ward was taller and bigger than her. The child usually threw tantrums and would kick Marinela in the face while she was putting on her socks. She also had the habit of throwing her bag at Marinela after coming home from school.

"Once I was busy ironing clothes, she asked for a glass of orange juice. I told her to wait awhile. To my surprise, she dragged me to the refrigerator and put my

warm and tired hands inside the freezer," she recalls. But she couldn't complain because the parents said their daughter is a special child. "Instead [of admonishing their child for her behavior], they reprimanded me. They would pull my hair and tear off my clothes and curse me," she cried.

Marinela tried to endure the sufferings for a year and a half. One day, she mustered enough courage to confront her male employer, demand for her unpaid salaries and ask to be allowed to leave. Angered, her male employer slapped her with a slipper.

Shocked and angry, Marinela threatened to report the matter to the police. Her employer countered that they would tell the police a different story and claim that she stole money from them so she could get arrested. "They are a well-known family. He also showed me his media ID," she said.

When her female employer got home and learned about Marinela's threats, she threw the bed sheets at her and ordered her to wash them. Tears were still streaming down Marinela's face when the woman grabbed her nape and submerged her face in the soapy wash-basin.

Since then, the couple ordered the family driver to keep an eye on Marinela because she might try to escape. One day, when her employers were not around, Marinela pleaded to the driver to let her go. The driver, who knew of the situation, took pity on her and let her go. Marinela wasted no time and ran as fast as she could. She went straight to the barangay hall where she reported everything that happened to her.

The police raided the house of Marinela's employers a few hours later but the family was no longer there. They all left for Baguio, leaving the driver alone in the house. The police questioned the driver who confirmed what Marinela already told the authorities.

Marinela was turned over to Visayan Forum. She was able to go back to school and graduate from high school. Later on, she became a dynamic advocate and leader of the SUMAPI. After years of dedicated service, she got married and is now planning to follow her sister-

in-law in Dubai, United Arab Emirates to work there as a saleslady.

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## Tarpaulin

For 17-year-old Girlie, coming to Manila was her only chance to find her mother who left them in Davao del Norte after a failed marriage. Holding on to her mother's promise that she will support her college education, Girlie, who had just graduated from high school, took the risk and left their hometown without even knowing her mother's exact address in Manila. But what she found later on was not the parent she was longing to meet, but the sad realities of domestic work—something which she was not prepared for and never expected to experience.

Girlie should have taken their travel from Davao to Manila as a bad sign of unfortunate things to come. Through their neighbor, Reynante, a recruiter, Girlie traveled the 'unusual' way with 80 other recruits, including her cousin. They crossed seas via inter-island vessels carrying their jeepneys. Each jeepney was packed with 40 passengers, much more than the normal capacity of 20 people. To accommodate them all, mats were rolled over the jeepney's floor where some of them were seated. Some were placed at the cargo area on top of the vehicle's roof where their luggage was used to secure them. Reynante rationed them with only noodles and salted fish to satisfy their hunger.

When they boarded the ferry in Samar, their traffickers hid them from the authorities by covering their jeepneys with a tarpaulin. Still inside, Girlie and the other recruits were declared as "cargoes." Some of them vomited and urinated inside the jeepney since they were not allowed to go out. All these they had to endure for eight days.

*"Nakakasuka talaga. Namanhid na ang buong katawan ko kasi hindi kami makakilos o makapagpalit ng posisyon. Tapos, harap-harapan na kaming naghuhubad at nagbibihis dahil hindi nga kami makalabas. May mga lalaki pa kaming kasama kaya talagang nakakahiya,"* (It was nauseating. Since we couldn't hardly move or change our position, my whole body felt numb. And we had no privacy; we were forced to undress and change our clothes in front of everyone, including the boys, which was very embarrassing.) Girlie recalled.

But that was not enough to discourage her. Upon their arrival in Manila, she immediately tried to call her mother but to no avail. She had nowhere else to go so she decided to join the other recruits though working was not her priority then. She was not even prepared for it, but Girlie could not think of any other way to survive.

Reynante brought her to the Balin Employment Agency in Caloocan City. She first worked as an all-around *kasambahay* for an employer who didn't miss a chance in calling her "*bobo*" (foolish), and "*tanga*" (stupid) every time she would mistakenly operate the appliances at home. She was not even allowed to go out. Disappointed and hurt, Girlie requested to be returned to her agency.

She was employed again, this time, as a babysitter. But the job also proved to be unfit for her for she still didn't have the skills to take care of a baby. And so, for the second time, Girlie was brought back to the agency.

While waiting for another job, Girlie was forced to stay in a room with other unemployed recruits. They were 25 males and females, 15 minors and 10 adults, crowded in a single room at the agency's office.

Then her third job came. "I will finally be out of this crowded room," she told herself. But what she thought was her "saving grace" turned out to be the worst as she was forced to work as a waitress in a restaurant-bar.

*"Pag nag-seserve ako nun ng alak at pagkain, lagi akong sinisipulan at hinihipuan ng mga lalaki. Pakiramdam ko noon ay isa na akong babaeng bastusin,"* (Everytime I would serve drinks and food, men would whistle and touch me. I felt like I was a woman with no morals.) Girlie painfully recalled.

After only a week, Girlie already asked her employer to return her to the agency. That meant going back to the crowded room she hated but there was no better option left.

There was not enough food and water in the agency. The ventilation was of no help either. Making matters

worse, Girlie and the rest were not allowed to go out unless they'll be hired for another job. They were given one option but it was equally difficult: to pay the agency P7,500 so they can leave for good.

Worried that she might be forced to work again in a bar, Girlie pleaded to be set free but to no avail. Fortunately, one of them was able to escape and reported the matter to the police.

The Caloocan Police together with the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) raided the agency and found Girlie and 25 others, many of whom were minors like her. Girlie and three other children were turned over to the Visayan Forum Foundation for assistance and temporary shelter.

Aside from the different sessions, seminars and activities provided for Girlie, Visayan Forum also tried tracing her mother's whereabouts but failed since there was no exact address and the telephone numbers were incorrect.

*"Sobrang malungkot ako kasi hindi ko man lang nakita ang nanay ko na siyang dahilan ng pagpunta ko sa Maynila. Di ko alam na ganito pala kahirap ang paghahanap sa kanya, na malalagay pa ako sa kapahamakan. Uuwi na lang ako kaysa malagay pa ako sa tiyak na kapahamakan,"* (I feel so sad that I didn't find my mother who was the only reason why I went to Manila. I didn't know that searching for her would be this difficult, that it would put my life in danger. Rather than put myself in further risk, I might as well go home.) Girlie said.

And so Girlie ended her long and frustrating search for her mother. She decided to come home to her family in Davao where she found solace in the presence of her father and siblings—far different from the agonizing journey she had to go through for a mother who never knew the risks she took just to be with her.

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## Telephone

When Vivian first came to her employer's house in Iloilo City, she had more hopes than fears about her work. The house had three floors and its interiors were no doubt expensive. A number of vehicles were also parked inside its spacious garage. Everything boasted of a luxurious living which only the well-off can afford.

Instead of worrying about the overwhelming tasks she might have to do for such a big place, Vivian became very excited. Her employer's house was far better than her home in a remote barangay in Aklan where there was not enough of everything, not even opportunities.

Her excitement, however, was cut short by the sad reality she soon discovered as she began serving the household.

She never thought that anything could be worse than what she already went through when she was still living with her relatives. Vivian vividly recalled doing household chores for her grandparents and other relatives upon the strict orders of her adoptive auntie who was supporting the family. Her uncle could not do anything to defend her for he also stopped working after suffering a stroke. Back then, Vivian felt so helpless. She had to do some errands and tasks for her friends and neighbors in exchange for a meager amount which she spent for her school expenses. After her grade school graduation, her auntie told her she could no longer afford to send her to high school.

Vivian decided then to go on her own. She accepted a neighbor's offer to work as a *kasambahay* to help her family and support her studies. She found herself feeling the same helplessness when she was working for her rich employer.

"I would get up at 5 a.m. to start doing all the household chores—from washing the car, doing the laundry, cooking their meals, to cleaning the entire three-storey house. It was a big house but I had no room to stay in. I catch a few hours of sleep in the living

room, but only after my employer's daughter arrives from her usual late night parties," she says.

Vivian was not even free to move around. She could not go out of her employer's compound unless it was for an errand. She was not even allowed to talk or mingle with anyone.

Her employer could afford a luxurious lifestyle but ironically, not her paltry P2,000 monthly salary. Her pay was reduced to P1,500 and the whole amount was sent to her grandparents who took care of her when she was orphaned.

To keep her sanity, Vivian would often use the phone to call her friends or join contests by phoning in her votes without knowing that they have corresponding charges. One time, her employer told her that their huge phone bill amounting to P15,000 would have to be deducted from her salary.

"I couldn't take working there anymore just to pay my debt," she explained. And so when she was asked to go out for an errand, she took the chance to ask their neighbors where she could find help. Somebody gave her the contact number of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), which she dialed immediately. After an hour, Vivian left her employer without taking any of her belongings except for the clothes on her back. She went straight to the DSWD which later referred her to Visayan Forum for temporary shelter.

Vivian stayed at the Visayan Forum safe house for three months. She refused to be sent back home. She insisted on finding another job in Iloilo City and being able to continue her studies.

It was during the Christmas season when she began to miss her family. When she couldn't bear being away from them anymore, she went home in the morning of December 25. Vivian's Christmas and longtime wish of going back to Aklan to be with her family finally came true.

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## Test Paper

Leah's employers beat her badly for hiding a test paper with a failing mark. Leah escaped from this household and is now hiding in fear for her life. Petite and looking much younger than 19 years old, she dreads her employers' threats to kill her the moment they find out where she is.

Leah grew up in a broken family. She is the eldest in a brood of four excluding her stepsiblings. Her parents separated and both have families of their own. She lived with her father and stepmother together with her siblings and a stepsister. Leah was just 11 years old when her mother ran away with another man to Antipolo City.

There was a certain Melinda, a recruiter, in Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte. In June of 2002, Melinda recruited Leah together with her 21-year old stepsister, a 16-year old cousin and a 15-year old town mate. Melinda told them that they will work in a restaurant in Batangas and will receive a monthly salary of P3,500. She added that they will be able to study and send remittance to their families. Leah's father and stepmother were informed that the siblings would be working in a restaurant, so they gave them permission to leave.

Melinda bought one-way tickets for the recruits. The son of a certain "Mommy" traveled with the girls aboard the ship to Manila. Once the group arrived at the Manila North Harbor, they rented a van to bring them to Balagtas, Batangas. Mommy, who was probably in her mid-forties, was indeed waiting for them in Balagtas. For two weeks, she fed the girls in her own house. In exchange for the free board and lodging, Leah was tasked to do house chores, while her two other companions were assigned to the *carinderia* (small eatery) and the other one was sent to the house of Mommy's other son.

One day, Leah was surprised when a number of young women went to the house to teach her how to dance. The group said they need to do that because if not, Mommy will punish them. Then, one night she was

brought to a club to orient her on the things that she will do. Leah was shocked to see a lot of nude young women dancing around the male customers. She recognized some of them, one was her classmate in Davao and the others were her town mates.

The night before her first "show," Leah and her companions managed to escape with the help of a certain Piolo, a construction worker who frequented the bar. He brought them to his friend in Malvar, Batangas. Together with his wife, Piolo helped them find work as domestic workers in Calamba Laguna and Tanauan, Batangas.

Leah ended up as a domestic worker in the house of Mark, one of Piolo's friends. Mark, a former soldier, lived with his wife Zeny and their one-year-old baby. They promised to pay Leah P1,500.00 a month. Instead, they only gave Leah transportation allowance when they allowed her to study in a nearby school.

Leah remembers Mark as a kind man while Zeny was unfriendly. "She is very moody. Sometimes she is kind, then suddenly she gets uncontrollably angry. She would slap my face, hit me in the head, and even pull my hair. Mark would often intervene by saying, "That is enough!" (*Masyado siyang bugnutin. Minsan mabait siya, tapos bigla na lang nagwawala. Pinagbubuhatan niya ako ng kamay, binabatukan at sinasabunutan. Madalas siyang awatin at sabihan ni Mark ng 'Tama na yan!'"*)

Because she wanted to finish her studies, Leah tried to endure the bruises and beatings. But one day, the tests became too much to endure.

When Zeny learned that Leah tried to hide the failed results of her test and school card, she punished her without remorse. Zeny slapped Leah, pulled her hair and then dragged her out of the house to humiliate her in front of their neighbors. The next day, Leah again tried to lie to Mark about the test results. Zeny flared up again and hit Leah with the "duster" (dust remover) again and again and didn't stop until the beatings left Leah with a 10-inch abrasion at her right hand and a black eye.

Leah still went to school despite her black eye, which she couldn't hide from her classmates. She tried to cover up what her employer did to her but her classmates who were also domestic workers convinced her to run away. With her classmates' support, Leah managed to escape from her employers and was brought to the Visayan Forum for temporary shelter.

After filing a case against Zeny, Leah decided to go home because she fears her employers would come and kill her once they find out where she was hiding.

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## Video Phone

For personal comfort and enjoyment, the daughter of Nina's employers, together with her friends, would force Nina to undress and pose in front of a video phone.

"They would pull up my bra. Then they would also pull down my panty. They would take pictures and video of me with their camera. After sometime, they would say 'we can earn from this,'" Nina vividly recalls. Later on, Jean, her employer's daughter, circulated the photos and video to her friends.

Soon after, Nina escaped, almost got lost in the city, and filed a case against her abusers.

Poverty taught 16-year-old Nina to take risks no matter what. "I wanted to help my family and to study. If I finish my studies, perhaps I would be able to find my father," she says. Life in the mountains of Ilocos, the northern part of the country, was harsh. Nina has never seen her father. Her mother single-handedly supported their family with her daily income of P80 (\$1.50) from selling vegetables.

"There was a woman who was going around our neighborhood, looking for people who want to work in Manila to be domestic workers. I was one of those who really wanted to work. The woman, named Cynthia, went to our house and asked me if I wanted to work in Manila. I said yes, so she told me she will bring me there and help me find an employer," Nina recalls.

Cynthia knew exactly how to convince Nina's mother. Cynthia assured her mother that she would be treated well by her employers. That money would come easily at P1,700 a month if Nina does the laundry and cleans up her employer's house.

"I would wake up early in the morning, at around 4:30 am, to prepare the children's breakfast. While cooking, I also clean up the kitchen. While cleaning, I also prepare the clothes for laundry. After preparing the children's breakfast, I also prepare the breakfast of my employers who usually leave at 7:15 am. When they wake up, I set the table for their meals. Then I wash the dishes

after they have eaten. After that, I wash the clothes that I soaked for a short time. At around 9 am, I start cooking their lunch. While cooking, I continue washing the clothes at the same time. I also bathe the pet dogs. After cooking and doing the laundry, I would iron the clothes that I washed the previous day. In the afternoon, I would clean up the house again and scrub the floor," Nina narrates her ordinary day.

She only gets to really rest when she takes a bath. After taking a bath she will start working again. "I had no day off. But I would sometimes go out with my employer to buy groceries. Then I would return to the house and resume my work. I just do whatever they asked me to do," Nina sums it up.

Nina got along well with her employer who eventually went to the United States. Her problem started when Jean, her employer's daughter, brought home her friends from the neighboring boarding house who became interested in her.

"While Jean and her friends were drinking, they would make fun of me and force me to drink too. When I refused, they would threaten not to give my salary," Nina said. She only yielded because she was afraid to lose her hard-earned pay, which she needed to send back home and save for her studies.

"They would start undressing me and would take video of me on their cell phones. They said they would post it on the Internet and earn money from it. They said they would also give me my share, so I would have extra income. But I didn't want to earn money that way. They would force me at first until I give in because I couldn't fight them," she said as she demonstrated how the group held her for a pose.

This group's form of amusement continued for sometime until Jean started hurting Nina whenever she refused. "She would hit me and beat me up. I tried to escape once but I seemed to have gotten used to the beatings. I endured the pain just to earn money," Nina explained.

Every time the beatings would happen, Nina felt so humiliated and disgusted but could do nothing but cry.

She had nobody to talk to and was afraid that no one would believe her. It happened a number of times until Nina finally learned how to say no. "I was already vomiting. I felt so dizzy. But they just shook my head. My head was spinning. They brought me out. While I was lying down, they pulled my legs up and then spread it apart. I fought back. They let go of me and left. I escaped that same night," said Nina with a glint of triumph in her misty eyes.

She ran to a nearby church where she sought the help of a barangay official. But Jean's group found her and managed to convince the official to release her back to them. After that incident, Jean locked her up in the house for good. "She didn't want me to work. They also didn't want to feed me anymore. They said I could no longer do any of the household chores. I asked her permission a number of times to just let me go back to the province, to my family, but she said I still have to wait for her mother to come back from the States. Then, I decided to escape again," she said.

Nina pulled off her escape when Jean was in school attending her summer classes. Only the houseboy was around at that time to watch over Jean's friends in the boarding house and a few cousins who slept over for a birthday party.

"After the celebration, I saw where the houseboy kept the key. I took the key and opened the gate, so I can be free. Once I was outside the gate, I got nervous because I didn't know where I'd stay. I had no money, where will I go? I was afraid because I didn't know anybody who can help me. I didn't know how my friend would react. What would she tell me? Will she help me? I was also worried that I might get lost, that I would not be able to see my family again. Then I called up my friend to fetch me," Nina narrates.

A friend referred her to another barangay official who brought her to the Philippine General Hospital for a medico-legal examination. Then she was brought to the hospital's Child Protection Unit whose staff referred her to Visayan Forum for temporary shelter.

"During my early stay at the safe house, I would always cry because I knew that I don't have a chance to see

my family again. I lost hope of fulfilling my dreams. The staff of Visayan Forum and the members of Samahan at Ugnayan ng mga Manggagawang Pantahanan sa Pilipinas (SUMAPI) would always say that it's not too late to get up after a fall. They said they will help me in my studies. I thought of everything they told me and realized that I should not give up or let my negative experiences in the past to get in my way," she said.

Healing was difficult for Nina and the people around her. In her first few weeks at the shelter, she would kick and punch the walls and scream out to release her frustrations. She refused to be with the other children and at times, would quarrel with them so they began disliking her, too.

It was through the games and counseling sessions that Nina finally started opening up. Her transformation was simply remarkable. She even decided to file a case against Jean and her friends.

"At first I didn't want to file a case, but the social workers explained to me my rights as a person, what others shouldn't have done to exploit me. I could also help my fellow domestic workers who may have experienced the same thing and also educate others on what they shouldn't do to their domestic workers. I thought that my employers might seek revenge and hurt me and my family," Nina reflects on her ordeal. She gets frustrated on the slow resolution of her case and is thinking of just going home. Her mother visited her once and she as well as other members of the family are supporting her fight.

"Visayan Forum helped me find my father so I finally got to see him," she said. She has become more optimistic and takes pride in being enrolled in a non-formal course in cosmetology. She is also a very active member of SUMAPI.

"My friends told me that I should not give up despite what happened to me. I experienced being poor without any education and people looked down on me. That's why I want to finish my studies so they would not look down on me. Though we are poor, at least we are able to study so we can uplift ourselves and other people will no longer call us ignorant," she ended. - ooOoo -

## **Water Tank**

Just to escape from her employer's abuses, Joyce and her co-worker jumped from a 15-meter-high water tank, landing on the roof of their neighbor's house. She had to muster all her guts to brave such an escape—the same feeling she had when she tried to jump out of poverty when she left home at age 16.

Born out of wedlock, Joyce never saw her father nor did she know how it felt to grow up with a mother. Her mother chose to start a new family in Zamboanga del Norte, so it was Joyce's maternal grandmother who raised her since birth.

Joyce's grandmother owned a small *sari-sari* store which she helped tend during weekends. Soon after, she would tend the store by herself even on schooldays because her grandmother could no longer work. Joyce was in second year high school at that time and the income from the store supported her and her grandmother. But her uncles, who were living with them in the same house, were hard on her, often calling her shameful names for every minor mistake she made.

Wanting to break out of her situation, Joyce decided to work for a distant aunt in Dipolog. She would care for her little cousins in return for free board and lodging and being treated as a family member. But alas, a man in the neighborhood tried to rape her one night. Joyce fought back and escaped harm. From then on, however, she feared that he would try again to force himself into her. So she decided to leave her aunt's house just to get out of harm's way.

It was clear to Joyce though that she had to continue working to sustain her regular remittance to her grandmother. Without telling anyone, she looked for another household to work for in Dipolog. She met a certain Lucia who offered her an easy job in Manila. But one of the conditions she imposed was that Joyce should lie about her age.

Joyce was interviewed by an alleged lawyer of the recruitment agency that Lucia worked for. The agency took her in but she didn't leave for Manila right away

because other recruits were expected to join the trip. While waiting, Joyce took time to visit her grandmother and tell her about her plans. Her grandmother gave her approval and even advised Joyce to be obedient to her future employers. Joyce later asked Lucia for a P500 advance which she left to her grandmother.

Eight days later, Joyce and eight other girls boarded a ship bound for Manila. Lucia's husband accompanied them during the journey. Arriving at the Manila harbor, the group was met and picked up by some agency staff.

Joyce and another girl, Jane, were told that they would work somewhere in Valenzuela. The employer fetched both girls from the agency. Neither of them was offered a contract nor informed on how much salary they would receive.

They would work from 4 a.m. until way past midnight. To this day, Joyce could still taste the sourness of the stale sandwiches they were forced to eat every day. To ease her hunger, she would take a quick bite of the sandwich whenever she got the chance. They weren't fed any breakfast and were only allowed to rest and eat twice a day, at 1 pm for lunch and 9 pm for dinner.

She didn't understand why her employer would always pepper her with curses and expletives. She withstood hearing the vicious words, but her body couldn't stand the physical abuse. Not a day went by that she didn't get hurt or cursed.

Joyce could not complain and no one could hear her cry anyway. She was forced into silent submission. Yet in her silence, she would plot her escape although she didn't know how.

The following week, Joyce and Jane made a daredevil escape. Both climbed up to the top of their employer's water tank, closed their eyes, and jumped onto their neighbor's roof. "*Nilakasan ko na lang loob ko para makaalis lang sa bahay ng amo ko,*" (I summoned all my courage just to get out of my employer's house.) Lea remembers the feeling before the leap.

Their surprised neighbor immediately called the hotline of Bantay Bata 163. It took a while before the abusive employer discovered the two girls' escape, but when she learned where they fled, she offered her neighbor money just to get the girls back. The man refused the offer and did not budge until the Visayan Forum social workers came to fetch the girls.

While Joyce and Jane were recounting their ordeal at the police station, the recruitment agency's representative came by to re-claim them. But upon the police's closer scrutiny of the girls' tampered birth certificates, the two minors were released to the custody of the social workers.

After spending sometime at the Visayan Forum safe house, Joyce eventually decided not to pursue a case against her employer and agency. She wanted to go back home to care for her grandmother and perhaps, return to school.

Today, Joyce is undergoing an alternative skills training with the help of the Provincial Social Welfare and Development Office of Dipolog.

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## **CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

The trafficking of young women into abusive domestic work still remains largely unnoticed. Many women are easily tricked into prostitution and other abusive work places.

The case studies presented in this book clearly illustrate how young women and children are dragged into exploitative domestic work --- from the recruitment process till they reach their work places. Each case strongly illustrates why domestic work issue may be considered as a forced labor issue.

There are women and children who are caught unaware and are put in debt bondage situations. They feel "obliged" to stay with their employers even without salary because of the debts they incurred even prior to their employment. More so, they are usually under threat, both physically and verbally, when they indicate their desire to leave their jobs. They are not even allowed to take a day off or go out of the house. They are physically confined and are closely guarded; there is only a slim chance to run away.

While others may be brave enough to escape, there are those who lack the courage and suffer in silence. They fear reprisal from their employers whom they regard as powerful in terms of social and economic standing.

### **Recruiters and traffickers**

A dilemma arises from asserting that exploitation is already happening during the recruitment stage. Legally speaking, exploitation under the pretext of an employer-employee relationship is not consumed. Hence, traffickers can claim innocence to the accusations of the victims' family. In this context, there is still much to do to protect domestic workers right from the start of the recruitment.

Recruitment is one crucial aspect of trafficking. The case studies demonstrate that even from the start, domestics are misinformed about many things. Recruiters just know where to find them. They choose far flung areas or poor provinces where they are likely to find their "potential recruits" who may be easily lured to their sweet talk and false promises.

Recruiters may be relatives, town mates and friends of the potential recruits. They may also be strangers who have just come to the province to find women and children who are interested to work in Manila or in any greener pasture. Whether the recruiter is known to the recruit or not is already immaterial because that is not even a guarantee to safe employment in the city.

That is why there are recruiters who use other means to vouch for their integrity. Some would come in flashy attires to somehow impress their "targets". They also brag about their track record in job placement, like citing how many women enjoy material gain after taking the jobs he or she offered them.

The most effective and common means used by these recruiters is offering very attractive arrangements for domestic work that even the girls' parents could not refuse. This includes a high salary, SSS and Philhealth benefits, rest days at least once a week, vacation every year, and an opportunity to see other places in Manila. They lie about the tasks which the girl has to do or avoid getting into details about the work like: the number of household members the *domestic* has to serve, the working hours, and the location and the kind of work place.

Recruiters don't usually give clear arrangements about the expenses the *domestic* has to pay later on like, the finder's fee, transportation fare, and even the transit meals. Giving a one-month advance to the girl's parents also helps in getting the latter's consent, especially for those who are cash-trapped and are tempted to "grab the bait" to solve their economic woes.

### **'Reminders' while in transit**

For many victims, suspicions only arise during transit. Many anecdotal pieces of evidence suggest that traffickers start the real orientation process once they start moving with the recruits to their destination. Having strong control of the recruits, traffickers begin to condition them that they are totally vulnerable and are left with no other choice but to go with them. "You are to evade authorities, to lie about your age and names.

Upon arriving in the city, you disperse in pairs and just converge outside the terminal," traffickers would usually instruct the recruits. Salary advances are also used by the traffickers to take a stronger hold of their recruits, thus, bonding the latter to such arrangement. They are forced to suffer in silence and accept their sad fate. Only a few of them are able to break free, those who have the real appreciation and awareness about the existence of safety nets that grip ports.

Ironically, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) has rules and regulations governing the private recruitment and placement of workers for local employment. Agencies cannot recruit in any part of the country without a license and an authorization from the concerned DOLE Regional office. Recruiters must also present the documents of the recruits such as the birth certificate from the local civil registry and a medical certificate issued by a government physician or by a reputable private medical practitioner. Regional Office should also be provided with a copy of the recruitment contract. In fact, the agency is supposed to notify the parents about the contact details of their children's employers.<sup>1</sup>

This is not what usually happens though. These rules and regulations are not strictly followed and monitored. Many domestic workers remain trapped in forced labor situations unknown to their families who are also in need of support mechanisms to alleviate their conditions.

## **Work pains**

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<sup>1</sup> Rules and Regulations Governing Private Recruitment and Placement Agency for Local Employment. Department of Labor and Employment.

Work places vary. The “good looking” ones are the potential targets for prostitution. They are trained and molded for the job that will lead them to brothels, bars or other night spots flocked by male customers.

Domestic work is not totally a safe job either. It becomes abusive when working conditions involve exploitation, physical or psychological abuse, trafficking and violations of the Labor Code and other relevant laws.

Multi-tasking is a common practice in private households. The *domestic* may be assigned to a large family or may be asked to also serve her employer’s other relatives. More often than not, they don’t enjoy the same comfort as their employers do. They are not even treated humanely. Violence may become extreme, including physical assault, verbal abuse and even sexual exploitation. They may also be beaten or jailed for accusations of theft without due process.

The absence of an employment contract is a contributing factor to this. The *domestic’s* lack of awareness about their rights, their lack of access to support mechanisms and their lack of information about the possible services they can avail of also contribute to their vulnerability. There are very few mechanisms and programs in place to alleviate the working and living conditions of domestic. Their work place is a private household which makes monitoring of their situation even more difficult.

More so, there is still no law which will address the specific issues and concerns of the domestic work sector. The Batas Kasambahay, otherwise known as the Magna Carta for Domestic Workers, remains pending in Congress for ten years now. This is a clear manifestation of the lack of appropriate attention given to the sector in terms of policies and services that should benefit them. Policy discussion and reforms are, at best, reactionary and are not addressing key issues.

### **The bottom line**

The bottom line is that trafficking cases are seldom filed with the context of having domestic work as a form of

exploitation. And even when abuses occur, domestics do not file action against their abusers.

Exploitation is vaguely seen in the context of trafficking, even when the person has already been "victimized" in the whole chain of events. Young girls are sold to employers and are left on their own to protect themselves against the exploitation while their recruiters enjoy the exorbitant fees gained from the trade, as if protecting the girls is no longer part of their business.

Traffickers do not see themselves as a contributing force or cause to the condition of exploitation. They are too concerned with quick profits to disperse the "goods" to prospective employers that they do no longer care what happens to the recruits. So in case of abuse, it becomes the recruits' sole decision and effort to complain or not.

Unfortunately, there are no contracts to speak of. Contracts are not honored. It is not a binding protection for the domestics who enter into verbal agreement with their employers. Often, or consistently, the contracts are seen merely as a formality to the turn over of the recruit or agency to the employers.

There is not much option for the abused domestics. In some instances, they try to return to the agencies but the latter do not even have a formal process to look into the complaint. The usual recourse is to find another employer for the domestics. Worse, like in the case of Elena, the agency owner would blatantly tell the girl to just be a "sex worker" since she had already been sexually abused by her employer. Parents have no way of knowing what is really happening to their children; everything transpires as the domestics are totally controlled by the trafficker. The only option left for the domestics is to escape and face oblivion in the city.

Domestic workers continue find themselves as victims of these two social forces, yet there is only a fragmented response by institutions. On one hand, institutions are concerned with stemming the flow of domestics through trafficking modes. They, however, fail to take into account the connection to exploitation practices once domestics are already in the different households. They

fail to see this because the relationship in question is just between the trafficker and the trafficked domestic worker. They see no relationship between the domestic and employer to speak of, hence domestic work is not scrutinized clearly as a purpose of exploitation.

### **Starting anew**

The dimensions of domestic work do not rule out the fact that there out there are recruiters and employers who humanely treat their domestic workers. They are sensitive and responsive to the sector's needs. Others even send their domestics to night schools and special trainings for their self-development

But for the domestic workers who are not as lucky and remain abused and hidden, Visayan Forum Foundation, Inc. and its partners like the International Labor Organization (ILO) work hand in hand to help alleviate their working and living conditions and to remove them from slave-like, forced labor situations.

There are features of domestic work that remain disturbing and unchecked. The unabated prevalence of these realities should prompt holistic responses to eliminate such abuses. No single response is tailor made to address all these issues.

A menu of programs and services is implemented not only to create awareness about the sector's situation and needs, but to also help the victims themselves get out of the trap, recover from the trauma and redirect their lives as empowered survivors. Rescue operations, temporary shelter, counseling sessions, psycho-social processing, recreational activities and skills trainings and workshops are among the interventions provided for the domestics to empower them not only with new knowledge but also with appropriate skills and right attitude as they face their lives anew.

Effective support and monitoring mechanisms, in this regard, are crucial to also ensure that these women and children will not be forced or be caught in the same situation again.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour defines *forced or compulsory labor* as "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily."

The Philippines has only signed this Convention in 2005. Massive awareness about its nature and legal implications needs to break off in the ground. There is no law that concretely defines forced labor as a criminal act nor are there relevant provisions to penalize forced labor acts.

In this light, the Philippines must study existing laws to determine if they give justice to the principles of the Convention. The Batas Kasambahay (Magna Carta for Domestic Workers) is a tool that may indirectly address this issue because of its certain provisions relating to indecent labor conditions. Clear penalties, however, should be accorded in this regard.

Exploitation in domestic work is now accepted as a living reality in the country. For a long time, abuses faced by domestic workers, though pervasive, are relegated as freak incidents which merit media reportage. Everyday, the media compile stories and blotters of battered and raped housemaids. This has significantly focused our attention to this neglected sector. The problem lies in the fact that our own Labor Code fails to cover these abuses as part of a larger phenomenon, beyond minimum wage issues and accorded benefits.

Establishing a clear link between trafficking and forced labor beyond doubt shall remain a big challenge for legal practitioners in the field. Seeing these two related acts in a proper context may help one to understand and clearly appreciate the idea of sharpening our approach to domestic work issue.

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