

**Trafficked into Forced Labor:
Selected Case Studies of
Domestic Workers in the Philippines**



Published by
Visayan Forum Foundation, Inc.
With support from
International Labour Organization (ILO)
Manila Domestic Work Project

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Writers

Roland R. Pacis
Ma. Cecilia Flores-Oebanda
Rebecca B. Ballesteros
Jannis T. Montañez
Marieta C. Culibao

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Visayan Forum Foundation, Inc.
4th Floor RFM Corporate Center
Pioneer Street, Mandaluyong City
Manila 1550 Philippines
Telephone Nos.: (63-2) 631-8101 local 7401/7421
Fax No.: (63-2) 634-0683
E-mail: visforum@pltdsl.net
Website: www.visayanforum.org



With support from
International Labour Organization (ILO) Manila
Domestic Work Project
19th Floor Yuchengco Tower, RCBC Plaza,
6819 Ayala Ave., 1229 Makati City
P.O. Box 4959 Philippines
Telephone No.: (63-2) 580-9900
Fax No.: (63-2) 580-9996
E-mail: manila@ilomnl.org.ph
Website: www.ilo/org/manila

PREFACE

The increasing global concern over the problem of trafficking in persons for the broad purpose of exploiting victims in forced labor continues to challenge many stakeholders today. While there exist international standards on trafficking that have gained massive national attention and actions that have had significant impacts in the ground, there is still a huge gap between progress in the fight against trafficking and progress in understanding the many modern faces of forced labor.

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

Over the past 15 years, the Visayan Forum has come across many young women and children who were coerced, misinformed, deceived and made to suffer in situations of forced labor, all in the name of domestic work. Many argue that hiring domestic work is necessary and desirable as it is part of the culture, yet the abuses and unfair treatment endured by the domestic workers, both here and abroad, are blatant and difficult to justify. In these modern times, as governments and people place increasing emphasis on the principles of social equity and human rights as well as issuing a renewed call for the rule of law based on social protection, we fear that we may be unduly leaving 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 these workers. The **Batas Kasambahay** (Magna Carta for Domestic Workers) seeks to formalize the rights of domestic workers and set parameters for decent working conditions for this population. In 2005, the Social Weather Station conducted a national survey revealing that 45% of the public is aware of the bill, while 9 out of every 10 people strongly approve its passage. Yet there is increasing frustration over the long delay that is currently hindering the passage of the bill.

In 2005, a National Domestic Workers Summit was held, a National Domestic Workers Agenda was developed and 1 million signatures in support of the Batas Kasambahay were collected and submitted. But not a single step has been taken to move this bill forward in the national legislature. Policy-makers can still fast-track this bill, however; it is never too late to deliver the legislative milestone for which the public and the international community have waited for the past 10 years.

In this light, we offer this book to put a human face to the struggles of domestic workers caught in the nexus of two interconnected social phenomena – trafficking for exploitation, and exploitation in forced labor. This book presents selected real-life stories of domestic workers that show how they became trapped in the cycle of trafficking for forced labor. Although many have fallen victim to this practice, 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 teach us and inspire us to help more domestics.

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


Ma. Cecilia Flores-Oebanda
President
Visayan Forum Foundation, Inc.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

DOLE	Department of Labor and Employment
DSWD	Department of Social Welfare and Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
NBI	National Bureau of Investigation
OFWs	Overseas Filipino workers
PGH	Philippine General Hospital
PhilHealth	Philippine Health Insurance Corp.
POEA	Philippine Overseas Employment Administration
RMI	Religious of Mary Immaculate
RORO	Roll-on, roll-off
SSS	Social Security System
SUMAPI	Samahan at Ugnayan ng mga Manggagawang Pantahanan sa Pilipinas
VF	Visayan Forum

INTRODUCTORY NOTES



The Philippines did not ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 29 on Forced Labor until the year 2005. The country thus has a lot of catching up to do with respect to the wide discussion and strategies that have developed over the past decades in the area of forced labor. Nevertheless, the country has been involved in actions concerning slavery and servitude, specifically regarding the inter-related problems of trafficking and child labor.

While Europe abolished its own trans-Atlantic slave trade nearly 200 years ago during the early 18th century, the problems of slavery and forced labor remained very real. The ILO began to propose ILO Convention 29 in the 1930's by defining forced labor as "all work or services 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, 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 problems of slavery and forced labor continue. The ILO estimates that as of 2005, there are still at least 12.3 million people worldwide trapped in conditions of forced labor. Out of these, around 9.8 million are exploited by private agents and enterprises, with approximately 2.5 million of these being victims of trafficking. The ILO also says that many victims of forced labor and trafficking are used either for commercial sexual exploitation or for economic exploitation.¹

Every year, private enterprises worldwide gain an estimated profit of US\$44.3 billion from forced labor, with some US\$31.6 billion of this amount coming from trafficking operations. More than half of this profit, or US\$15 billion, is made as a result of people trafficked and forced to work in industrialized countries.²

With these figures, the forced labor dimension of the complex issue of trafficking must be seriously understood. Yet 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 little information on trafficking has been studied within the context of forced labor, or vice versa. One such under-studied, exploited group consists of domestic workers.

Situation of Domestic Workers

Domestic workers are large in number, yet remain invisible and marginalized both economically and socially because of the myths surrounding their employment (such as that domestic work is safe because the workers are located inside households and may get a chance for schooling). Most domestic workers

1. *ILO Forced Labour and Human Trafficking: Estimating the Profits Working Paper*, 2005.

2. *Ibid.*

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are girls and women of low social status, who are among the lowest-paid workers in the informal sector.

According to an ILO country study on domestic workers in the Philippines, country estimates 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 (VF) estimates that there are at least 2.5 million persons employed as domestic workers, 1 million of whom are children.

A large percentage of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) serve as domestic workers. In 2002 alone, they accounted for 22% of newly-hired OFWs, while from 2000 to 2002, an average of 67,694 newly-hired domestic workers were employed outside of the Philippines. According to unpublished data from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), 99% of new hires are women.

Because of poverty, many such workers are lured to migrate to cities, provinces and other areas where there are more opportunities to earn money 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.

Once they are employed, most domestic workers perform multiple roles within the household and work for long hours, yet they remain underpaid and are oftentimes abused. Even if they are paid, many are not covered by the Social Security System (SSS) or the Philippine Health Insurance Corp.

Poverty drives many domestic workers to migrate to cities, provinces and other areas where there are more opportunities to earn money for themselves and their families.

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(PhilHealth). With little or no pay or adequate compensation, many domestic workers continue to fall into debt bondage.

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

Domestic workers suffer very long working hours, as they are always on call. They perform all-around chores, often with multiple employers. They have limited days off and too little freedom to transfer to other jobs. Moreover, domestic workers work away from their homes, without any protection or social support. Isolated from family and peers, they rarely leave their situation even when they suffer abuse.

Around half of the country's local domestic workers work in Metro Manila, the nation's capital. They are among the 10 million people fleeing 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 the Visayas, Mindanao and Southern Luzon provinces.

Based on VF's statistical profiles of rescued domestic workers in Metro Manila, there is a very high incidence of victims coming from the provinces of Negros Occidental and Negros Oriental, Davao, (General Santos, Zamboanga), Cebu, Samar, Leyte and Bicol. The urban centers of some of these provinces also generate a high demand for child domestic workers, as in the case of the chartered cities of Bacolod, Davao, Cebu, Iloilo, Batangas and Zamboanga.

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

Overseas domestic workers from the Philippines face similar vulnerabilities and abuses as domestics at home. They live away from their families and work behind the closed doors of their employers without defined 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 a high incidence of exploitation of women and children. Next to trafficking in drugs, money and firearms, human trafficking is a very lucrative underground business, in part 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 vulnerable.

In the Philippines, trafficking is considered a crime and is punishable by a maximum fine of 5 million pesos and life imprisonment under Republic Act 9208, or the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003.

Yet trafficking remains a very complex issue, which cuts across the phenomena of prostitution, child labor, child abuse, domestic servitude, and abuse of migrant workers. Thus, present responses to the problem must go far beyond just law enforcement or even welfare approaches.

While official institutions acknowledge the global nature of trafficking, they respond to it, first and foremost, as a national problem. Yet the failure to protect many women and children in the country remains a national shame. Victims are sold, abused and robbed of their childhoods. Even parents themselves fall victim

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to trafficking by selling their children to traffickers and pedophiles. This problem, therefore, has historical and economic roots that make it difficult to solve.

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The precise figures of trafficking both within and from the Philippines remain unknown, or estimated at best. By way of geographical background, 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) operation of buses from Mindanao provinces to Luzon cities.

Apart from the numerous victims trafficked within the Philippines by these routes, VF's database of victims rescued in major ports across the country reveals that a huge number of our young girls are also bound overseas. Indeed, as mentioned above, the Philippines is a leading source of migrant workers who are now scattered worldwide. According to the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), some 7.76 million Filipinos were reported to be working abroad as of December 2003 (this number does not include undocumented migrants, who are more vulnerable to exploitation). In particular, recruiters traffic the recruits to Japan as entertainers and to Hong Kong and the Middle East as domestic workers. The victims do not have work contracts or any other such standard details about their future employment. They are harbored in undisclosed training centers while the recruiters arrange for visas and work permits. During their stay, the recruits are charged for all the expenses of their training, which

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will be deducted from their salaries when they are 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. As stated above, they do not have clear information about their destination, work or employers. Thus, being young, they easily fall prey to traffickers and even town mates who promise domestic work, but many end up instead in other forms of forced labor. Some are made ready, like bleached commodities, to enter the prostitution market, while others are sent to sweatshops. Even those who enter domestic work as promised may face various unexpected forms of abuse. In any case, then, large numbers of victims end up deceived and maltreated through the recruitment and trafficking process.

Traffickers constantly change their methods. However, there are still critical indicators that can be used to spot victims during transit. Traffickers tamper with their victims' birth certificate entries, especially the dates of birth. They use "substitute" birth certificates, usually those of victims' siblings. 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 in order 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 they

The trafficking network thrives from the unending supply of unsuspecting young girls from source provinces

are questioned by authorities. Often, the victims are at the mercy of the traffickers because they have not, in the first place, informed their parents that they are going with a stranger, the trafficker.

From source communities to destination cities, trafficking involves an intricate network of well-placed individuals. It is nothing less than well-entrenched, syndicated, organized crime. The trafficking network thus 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. Such recruitment for work is a culturally accepted practice in many communities. Fueled by frustrations brought about 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. Thus traffickers, with their local contacts and community stature, convince parents to consent to their children traveling for work. The headhunters pocket P500 to P1,000 per head.

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Many recruitment agencies, even if they exist legally, are involved in illegal recruiting practices. During transit, traffickers employ transporters and fetchers to ensure that the victims reach their direct employers, the placement agencies. Within the ports, there are freelancers who prey on lost victims. To pass through the 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 those of domestic workers who were rescued by Visayan Forum, it is important to discuss in brief VF's work.

VF 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 work seriously on the issue of trafficking more than five years ago, with the opportunity provided by the Philippine Ports Authority (PPA) 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 six regional offices including nine 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 chokepoints, transit points and hotspots, especially ports and interconnected land routes. VF's partners are convened under the Multi-Sectoral Network Against Trafficking, a nationwide alliance composed of partners including local executives, law enforcers, government social workers and champions in the justice system.

To protect victims, VF specializes in providing a holistic set of direct services in port halfway houses, including 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 complements and is supported by VF's Kasambahay Program. VF has been a forerunner on the issue of domestic work, specifically that of women and children, since 1995. The Kasambahay Program is VF's pioneering work

on the issue of child domestic labor and domestic work 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 shelters, hotline counseling and medico-legal services to reach out to abused domestic workers who are by their nature scattered and invisible. VF also builds the capacities of partner stakeholders because it believes that no single institution can address this 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* (“partners at home”) and is used to encourage domestic workers and their employers to embark on partnerships. Instead of the usual terms like *katulong* and maid, this term emphasizes domestic workers’ positive role as an invisible engine of our economy, freeing employers to be productive outside their households while remitting much-needed cash to the workers’ poor families in the provinces.

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 a proactive role for local governments in providing services and local ways to settle disputes, placing primacy on the protection of domestic workers while recognizing the rights of employers at the same time.

VF believes that this legislation is timely, relevant and absolutely necessary. Indeed, as demonstrated by the fact that last year 1 million signatures were collected in support of the Batas Kasambahay, there is an outcry for an omnibus law for

domestic workers because present laws are incomplete, outdated and do not give enough protection to domestic workers. Also noteworthy is the call of the ILO tripartite partners to fast-track consensus-building processes in order to facilitate the passage of the bill.

Currently, 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, as 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 objects of sexual innuendos; after all, these activities may be seen as providing personal comfort.

In the existing law, the minimum monthly wage for domestic workers in highly urbanized cities is still P800. The monthly wage for chartered cities is P650, while P550 is the wage for other municipalities. These rates are not at par with what many employers currently provide. Moreover, 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 previously-mentioned exploitative practices such as debt bondage and trafficking. In addition, few victims pursue

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legal cases against employers because penalties for erring employers are said to be “soft.”

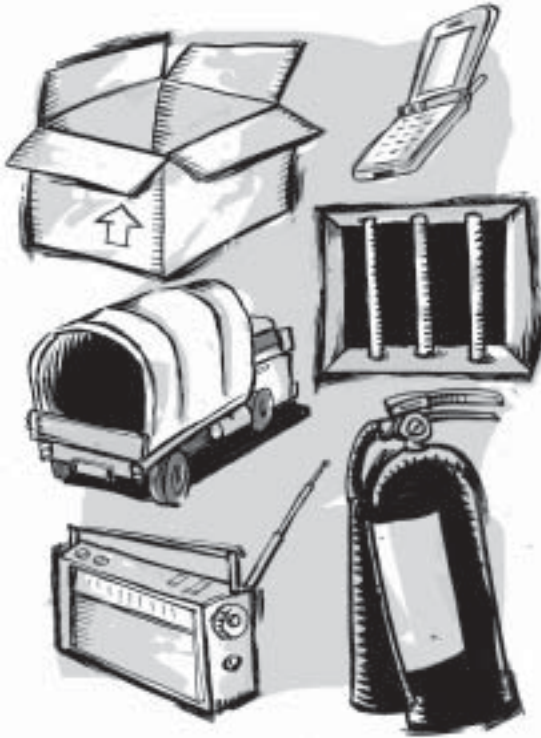
Once enacted, the Batas Kasambahay will bring this traditionally informal work sector closer to the benefits and protection accorded by law to the formal labor sector. Among the fundamental rights of domestic workers enshrined in the Batas Kasambahay are the rights to humane treatment, basic needs, security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

In addition, one clear benefit that money cannot buy, but the law should give, is the right to gain higher skills and education beyond elementary education.

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

Finally and most importantly, there is an urgent need for effective implementation of laws to protect domestic workers. Scattered and outdated, the present Labor Code is hardly felt by the sector. With a lack of support from the national government, 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 other cities such as Makati and Iloilo have been inspired to institutionalize comprehensive efforts at the local levels to provide domestic workers with some of the protection to which they are entitled.

THE CASES





Behind Bars

VF'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 had filed a case of theft against her. Selma was not given any legal representation as required by law. She reported thinking that she was condemned to rot in detention with no hope of release in the foreseeable future.

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 for Manila. Sally paid Selma a visit and enticed her to come to Manila and work for a middle-class family. Selma agreed to take her offer. After six months of unpaid work, however, Selma contacted Sally again to request help in finding 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 Selma's dismay, however, her new employer too failed to pay her for three long years. In addition, she suffered daily beatings for every mistake that she made. At night, when male customers went 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 didn'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 became pregnant. Upon discovering this, her employer assigned her strenuous tasks, made her carry heavy objects, and forced her to drink a bitter concoction, which induced a miscarriage. Selma repeatedly begged her employer to let her go so that she could find better opportunities, but her employer remained stonehearted.

Her employer also insisted that Selma had to pay for the transportation expenses she incurred when she first came to Manila. Desperate, Selma finally 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 then taken to prison at a nearby police station. No lawyer came to represent them.

Selma and Tanya languished in jail for three months. When VF learned about their plight, its social workers asked the police to release the two girls to VF's 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, saying that she would drop the charges if they would 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

**"I'd rather
suffer in jail
than return
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of my cruel
employer"**

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one will 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 VF's social workers that she wanted to go home to her province.

The social workers understood her initial desire for repatriation. But since the hearings of the case required her presence in Manila, they persuaded her to stay in order to see the case through. After a few weeks, Selma decided to leave the safe house and find another job. Both Selma and Tanya have now settled down and are living in Cavite.



The Box

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

VF first met Maya at the Manila Port together with other recruits from Dumaguete. Law enforcement officials suspected that something was amiss in the recruitment of the victims but could not prove that there was anything wrong with the recruiter's documents. Therefore, while Maya's group briefly stayed at the Port Halfway House, they were soon returned to the recruiter, as the methods of the recruitment agency appeared to be legal.

Three weeks later, Maya called VF's 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 at that time for a rich family in Paco, Manila. Her duties included doing all of the ironing, laundry and daily cleaning of the six-storey house. However, while her tasks were clear, how she was to be paid was not.

Maya was given a small room to rest, where an empty box served as her only bed. Her employers did not allow her to venture beyond the gates. She was told not to talk to anyone – her friends, family or relatives – or even to think of asking for help.

Maya tried to brave the conditions for at least a month. However, one time when her employers left, Maya at last called VF's hotline number, which she had obtained from the contact card that the social workers in the halfway house had given 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 had a domestic worker named Maya under their employ.

**“Everything
just didn't
feel right
so I wanted
to leave”**

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 escape at last. Once they were outside, Maya 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 came 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. Maya plans to find another job someday that is not related to domestic work.

Finally, Maya is living her life outside the box.



Calendar Girls

Wearing flashy jewelry and bragging about her connections to 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 large 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 were to receive P2,500 a month, have days off and go anywhere they wished.

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

Meanwhile, the girls' 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 had helped to land jobs in Japan, who had already 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

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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 would 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 would have to take P1,000 from each of them as a 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 might have declined Virgie's seemingly sweet offer. Now, however, they were under Virgie's control because their parents had taken the money. They were already in debt.

The two girls' misgivings deepened when they were instructed to lie about their real age should authorities inquire about them. 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, together with the ship's crew members, were distributing contact cards and flyers to disembarking passengers. These strangers told the passengers to keep the cards and to call the hotline if they ever needed help in the future.

The recruits regrouped in an eatery across the 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: every night, some of their companions would be allowed to leave the house. A van would come to fetch the girls, then would return the next morning.

The sisters' fears were somewhat allayed each time they were tasked to clean up the house with the help of the other girls, as this meant that they would not be leaving in the mysterious van. They also cooked for the group during their month-long stay in the center. When they asked Virgie if they would receive any money for their hard work, however, she simply scolded them.

Aside from household chores, the recruiter asked the two girls to do another form of service

Because they already partially suspected 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 then 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. Soon they were told they were ready to start their dancing lessons.

During their dancing class, some girls teased them, saying that April and May would soon start entertaining men who would pay them handsomely if the sisters treated them nicely and manipulated them with some sweet talk. Realizing that they were to be trapped in prostitution, the two girls pleaded with Virgie to let them go back to domestic work but they were simply ignored.

One night, the girls were herded into a room and told to trim their pubic hair. Sensing the danger awaiting them, the sisters instead tagged along with some girls from Surigao for a chance to escape their fate. They sneaked out of a backdoor, found an opening in the fence, and ran as fast as they could, dissolving into the darkness.

One of them had hidden in her underclothing the calling card that was given to them at the Manila Port. It bore VF's hotline for the pier, which they immediately called. A few hours later, VF's social workers met the girls in a churchyard, where they had been hiding.

After another month of waiting at VF's safe house, April and May finally went home to Negros. Although empty-handed, they were more than thankful to be home and free.

The Contract

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For Clarita, the contract seemed heaven-sent. It included a P3,500 monthly salary, plus bonuses and SSS benefits. It also mentioned something about vacation every six months. Just for signing the contract, Clarita could also get P1,000 in advance from her first month's salary. Surely, Clarita thought, her employer must be very kind.

A single mother raising three children and a woman who can barely read and write, Clarita could not find any other tempting offer. She lived in one of Cebu's growing slum colonies, and following her husband's death, which occurred a year ago, she was left to eke out a living by servicing households in adjacent subdivisions. She worked as a stay-out laundry woman and was paid in piecemeal. But it was not every day that she was asked to come over and wash clothes, so it was not every day that she brought 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 read, "YAYAS, HOUSEMAIDS FOR HIRE." She left her babies with her mother-in-law and went to work in Manila, just as countless other mothers have done before her.

The first contract that Clarita signed after talking to a recruiter was difficult to understand. The agency told her that

TRAFFICKED INTO FORCED LABOR

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 children as an advance payment of her salary. Clarita did not bother to ask about security benefits and days off at this time because she supposed that she would not be traveling anywhere in Manila anyway.

But Clarita found her actual employment contract a bit odd. The salary was slightly smaller than anticipated, P3,500 a month, although it included SSS benefits. Her new contract also allowed her to take a vacation every six months. The P1,000 advance payment earlier given by the recruiter was stipulated in the contract as well.

Clarita soon began to work for a couple who were also raising three children, who reminded her of the three children that she herself had left behind. She also shared the task of caring for the house and the children with another domestic worker. At first, the division of their tasks wasn't clear, but the two domestic workers soon sorted out their duties 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 repetitive tasks and small errands, starting at 4 a.m. Clarita would cook, clean the house, and bathe her wards before sending them off to school, which had to be done before the parents left for work.

The other domestic worker washed and ironed the clothes. Clarita and her companion shared not only tasks but also a limited supply of 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. As their workload increased, their rest periods fell by the wayside, and Clarita no longer had the energy to think of or write home.

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

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

Distraught and unfocused on anything but her emotions, Clarita at once negotiated the payment of two months' salary from her employers. They granted her P4,000, which she immediately sent home. Anticipating that Clarita herself would try to come home, her family strongly warned her not to leave her job. But Clarita, who was still grieving over the loss of her child, decided to run away. By that time, she had learned only too well that domestic work in the city, instead of helping her to provide for her children, had led her into an exploitative situation in which she lacked not only the means to help her family but also access to news of their situation – a level of isolation that proved tragic in this case.

**Clarita
endured
this sacrifice
just to pay off
the debts
that she had
incurred from
her recruiter**

Cradles



Throughout her young life, Julia has jumped from one dangerous home, or cradle, to another. Yet with each attempt to seek safety and acceptance, Julia has found herself the 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 policeman who offered to help her find her auntie in Davao City as well as to give her work referrals. But the policeman brought her instead to a secluded beach outside their town. When they arrived, he took out his knife, pointed it at Julia's neck and raped her.

The policeman threatened her, ordering 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 Julia's great loss of dignity for a P20,000 cash offer.

Fearing discrimination against the family, her mother subsequently handed Julia over to a local recruiter seeking domestics for Manila. Julia had no choice but to go because her mother had already pocketed her P1,500 salary advance.

Julia and the other minors in her group of recruits quietly passed through the ports on the way to their destination. They had been instructed to avoid talking to anyone while on board

the ship. Prospective employers were already waiting for them when they arrived at the agency's office in Manila. Like commodities for sale, each girl was scrutinized by the employers and then taken away after the signing of a contract.

"My employer promised me that I would work just as a domestic, that all I had to do was clean their house," Julia related. "But when I got there, I did more than just clean their house. In the morning, I'd wake up at around 6 a.m. and do the laundry until 9 a.m. By then, I would have already finished cleaning the house and taken a bath. Then, I would man my employer's hardware store. I carried bags of cement, 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 store at around 8 p.m. Then, I'd go back to the house and clean it up again, and after that I'd take care of the elderly member of the family until 3 a.m. I only got to sleep between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m."

Julia also had to endure constant verbal abuse. Her female employer labeled her "*tanga*" (foolish), "*gaga*" (stupid) and "*kulang sa turnilyo*" (crazy). "It was painful for me, especially when she would say demeaning words, foul words. Every day, she would tell me that I was crazy and stupid. I couldn't stand 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 was hurt by what they were doing to me. At first I really couldn't take what they were telling me, but later on, I just accepted that I was crazy and stupid," she said in Filipino.

**"My employer
promised me
that all I had
to do was clean
their house...
but when I got
there, I did more
than just clean
their house"**

Her physical beatings also became regular. Once, her employer's daughter hit her with lead pipes, and sometimes she would be kicked for no reason at all.

"My body became numb, I didn't feel any pain at all," Julia reported sadly. "Although I wanted to complain, I couldn't leave

**"Although
I wanted
to complain,
I couldn't leave
because I owed
the agency
a certain amount
of money that
I had to pay"**

because I owed the agency a certain amount of money that I had to pay. I had also signed a contract." Moreover, she hadn't paid back the P1,500 cash advance that her mother had taken during the early stages of her recruitment.

"The hardest thing was being in an unfamiliar place that 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," Julia explained. "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 would think about it. For more than a year, I kept telling her that I would just run away. She gave me P7,500 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 finally decided to flee. While her employer was out, she ran away and went straight to the police. Law enforcement officials referred her to VF, where she was placed under protective custody for three months.

Julia's negative feelings toward her mother and other siblings were a central topic in each of several counseling sessions that she received. "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 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 even knowing where to go. Confused and frustrated, she boarded a bus bound for Batangas.

She soon found herself in Batangas, another unfamiliar place, and 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. This household seemed to be an ideal cradle where Julia could rest at last, but then one night, Marcia's uncle came to Julia's 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, which informed VF about her case. VF soon regained custody of Julia. Despite VF's assurances that it will back up her pursuit of justice against her abuser, Julia still refuses to press any charges. She wants to overcome her past 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.

**“When I was
alone I thought
that I had
no one
to support me
and sympathize
with me”**

Diploma



Lani is out to prove that although achieving the dream of finishing school might be difficult, 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 support from fellow domestic workers, she says, she would have lacked the courage to overcome many challenges 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 explains.

Lani’s parents were the caretakers of an undeveloped parcel of land at the foot of the Batangas mountains. Their house was burned down, so they had to start all over again by planting root crops, vegetables and coconut trees. There was also no irrigation in the area, although there was a small creek that drew water from a mountain spring during the rainy season.

Ever since she could walk and carry a basket, the diminutive Lani was made to sell her family’s vegetables in the barrio. She used her money for school projects and to buy her uniforms.

Immediately after graduating from grade school, Lani

decided to enter domestic work. She was just 12 years old at the time. "I needed money for my (high school) studies because my parents' earnings from selling vegetables would only cover my siblings' expenses. 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 of seven children.

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

"At first I found it difficult to get along with other people," she related. "I was also not used to difficult work without (enough) rest. It was tough as well to be away from my family. Sometimes when I got sick, I couldn't even rest because I was too 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."

**"Sometimes when
I got sick,
I couldn't even
rest because
I was too
embarrassed to
ask for a break"**

Thanks to much patience and good advice, Lani obtained 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 explained.

Combining higher education and work was a tough challenge, although 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, Lani's sister became sick, so she asked permission from her employer to go home so she could take care of her.

“It felt different to be with other people, to live in an unfamiliar house with strangers”

Her employer denied 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,” Lani remarked.

To survive, Lani began to look for a kinder employer. She finally found one who treats 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,” Lani reports happily. “Whenever I ask permission to go to my parents, she allows me. I can always ask for anything I need and she will 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.” When discussing her current employer, Lani beams like a child who has found a lost mother.

Lani has also found time to participate in the activities of the Samahan at Ugnayan ng mga Manggagawang Pantahanan sa Pilipinas (SUMAPI) under the Batangas chapter. SUMAPI members instruct their fellow domestics in computer literacy. “I learned a lot about computers. I learned how to design and how to lay out text and drawings. I'm happy (because) it made me think faster. That helped me in my studies,” Lani says.

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 advice and informed me about my rights. They were there when I had problems.”

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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 feel that I don't have parents and I ask myself why this 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 concludes.

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 her *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 on their arms and bodies but the distant cousins 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 to 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 a sister.

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“We were all-around domestic workers. Our employer was very strict. She didn’t allow us to have days off. And every time we asked 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 watched 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 on the outer side of the grills and then padlock everything. She didn’t want the two girls to become acquainted with the neighborhood. Thus 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 cruelty. “She would ask me to kneel on a stool or over some scattered mung bean seeds, then order me to balance a fire extinguisher with one outstretched arm,” Che said while demonstrating the punishment.

**“Sometimes,
when our
employer
was tired,
she would force
one of us to beat
the other”**

Both girls had to endure 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 awaiting 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 then called the Visayan Forum hotline that he had seen on the news.

VF gave shelter to the cousins. During their medico-legal examination, doctors from the Philippine General Hospital (PGH) noted signs of hematoma on the arms, legs and backs of the girls. VF helped the girls file a case for child abuse against their employers.

Because the preliminary investigation was moving slowly, the two girls requested that they be returned home to Leyte before the hearings began. 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 was no longer a minor, she might be able to make more well-informed decisions on her own behalf. Che, on the other hand, decided to stay home for awhile; she also didn't inform the social workers about her cousin's trip. She spent her days tagging 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 a.m., then by the afternoon she would tend the store, working until past midnight. She would work even on Sundays because the store was hardly ever closed.

Rhea thought that since she was no longer a minor, she might be able to make more well-informed decisions on her own behalf

Her employers would accuse her of stealing 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 guessed that after the verbal abuse and accusations, the physical beatings would soon follow. Indeed, before long, slappings and beatings were happening to her once more. So she decided to leave.

She contacted the VF once more and stayed in its safe house for a 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 program that gave her the opportunity to be a part of the formal work force.

The case that Rhea and Che filed has not reached any definite conclusion. Rhea ultimately went home, but though her nightmares come less frequently, they still have not been extinguished.

**She would
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on Sundays
because
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was hardly
ever closed**

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 when she survived the heat of the burning



flat iron pressed against her arm during her ward's birthday party.

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

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

Amy ended up serving not only Rowena, but eight other members of Rowena's family, including her bedridden mother. She cooked breakfast as early as 4 a.m.; then, she would accompany the school-age children to school. She would pedal a three-wheeled bike loaded with all the children as well as the bags and books that they were carrying, which Amy also dreamt of using someday.

Returning from her school trip by 8 a.m., Amy would single-handedly serve those who were left in the house. She would do the laundry, clean the house, wash dishes and do numerous odd jobs until lunchtime, when she would cook and serve the family again. She would continue 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, and would wake up the next morning wearing the same clothes as the day before.

Being the servant of a household with nine members was not easy. Amy says that she was always treated like a slave who was expected to obey orders humbly and without complaint, and she was immediately punished for even the slightest mistake. She had always to be on guard to respond to every whim of the master, she recalls, as if she did not have a mind of her own. Indeed, although she was already 16 she was treated like a *kulang-kulang* (ignoramus). She also grew to hate her kinky hair because her employers always made jokes about it, saying that it was proof that she was from an indigenous tribe from the mountains.

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

"They always accuse me of stealing every missing item in the house. They didn't trust me because they thought I was stealing money to buy candies," Amy said. In reality, she still remembers the sweetness of the candies and chocolates she merely dreamt about during her toughest times, a dream that often kept her spirits up.

Once Amy was accused of stealing money. When her employers could not find the missing money 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 confessed," she said.

She was always treated like a slave who was expected to obey orders humbly and without complaint.

Amy didn't much like Eman because he was supposed to take care of Rowena's ailing mother, but Amy ended up doing this by herself. Moreover, Eman 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 for his strong build.

**“Eman,
my employer’s
nephew, offered
to either hit me
in the face
or strangle
my neck until
I confessed”**

It was during the birthday party of Rowena's daughter that Amy and Eman's silent war turned dirty. Everyone was preparing for the party, and Amy was told not to touch the lemons inside the refrigerator since they would be used for the *pansit* (noodle dish) that would be served at the party. While Amy was ironing clothes, Eman took some of the lemons and used them to clean his fingers without Amy's knowledge. Upon discovering this, Amy politely asked Eman why he had used the lemons. She got the most unexpected reply – a strong press of a 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 medical attention.

Amy only drew strength from the thought that she would earn some money for her grandmother as a reward for patiently enduring her situation. Her salary was sent directly to her parents in Samar, which was why she didn't receive it regularly. But when she talked to her mother over the phone, Amy found out that her parents had only received the 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 a complaint at the National Labor Relations Commission to claim her unpaid wages.

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Her patience snapped when Rowena didn't allow her to go home for her grandmother's wake. Her natural strong will at last prompted her to escape.

Luckily, Amy met some good Samaritans who gave her refuge for a few days. A vendor introduced her to another employer within the village, who took Amy in for three days before calling the VF hotline. The marks on Amy's body were subsequently 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 VF's 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 no longer ashamed. The flat iron's marks on her arm will burn her no more.

Medicine

At the young age of 14, Elisa was no stranger to domestic work. Rather, she had already been working for families far



away from her home. Thus, going to Manila offered her a big chance to earn more money than what she was currently receiving.

The second of seven children and the eldest girl, Elisa had made a sacrifice by discontinuing her studies. Her younger brothers had also dropped out of school to help their mother earn a living by working as 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 long, however. Her father would always worry about her because she was sickly, and Elisa was forced to come home after she was hospitalized for three days.

Following this, a recruiter, who was a distant relative and townmate in Iligan City, paid her a visit. The recruiter enticed Elisa and her cousin, May, to come work in Manila. May decided to go so that she could watch over the younger Elisa.

The cousins traveled for long hours to reach Manila. Their prospective employer, who also hailed from their province, decided to accompany the girls herself so that the port authorities would not 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 only half of this. 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, however, 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 could expect harsh 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 duties, which usually started as early as 5 a.m. They were permitted to sleep only after midnight, long after the children had all gone to bed, when the employers had nothing more to ask from them.

Overworked and fed only meagerly, Elisa once more became 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, and after three more months, the cousins finally decided to leave. So when their recruiter called to check on how they were doing, they told her about their complaints. Upon learning that Elisa was sickly,

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the recruiter immediately came to visit them in Manila. She secretly told them what to do when they perceived a chance to escape, including where to go and how to get there.

Their employers somehow came to suspect that something was going on between the cousins. But a smooth escape came within the girls' reach when they were instructed to clean their employers' other house in Marikina. Namely, 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 where their recruiter had told them to go. It turned out that their recruiter had directed them to her own relatives.

May had the means to go home right away because her mother had bought a ticket for her. But Elisa had no ticket, so she would have had to stay behind. The cousins therefore went to the shipping companies to seek help. One of the shipping companies they approached referred them to VF while they were arranging for a discounted fare.

Elisa stayed at the VF safe house for some time because it took a while to request VF's partners to shoulder the cost of her 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 only after participating in the National Domestic Workers Summit last September 2005.

P500



Elena was just 15 years old when her parents traded her for P500 to a recruiter in Misamis Oriental and sent her to work in Manila.

“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 had started working as a domestic in Cagayan de Oro City.

Following the P500 payment, a woman transported Elena and the other child recruits by land and sea, hiding the children. The recruiter went ahead, 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 recruitment agency. Elena then 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, Elena’s female employer took her child for a vacation in the U.S. The husband stayed behind. He immediately abused Elena the very night that his wife left. “It was 12 midnight,” Elena recounts. “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 [later] 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.’” In response, he cut strands of Elena’s hair to prove his power over her.

When Elena asked for help from the agency owner, she was told that since she was no longer a virgin, she might as well be a “sex worker”

Unfortunately, it was not the last time that Elena was violated. Instead, the sexual abuse continued for quite some time. “I found myself always crying. I just wanted to go home whether or not it meant forgetting this nightmare,” she said while staring blankly ahead.

Elena was eventually brought back to the recruitment agency. She immediately told the agency owner everything that had happened to her. But when she asked for help, she was told that since she was no longer a 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 that, but she is haunted by the memory of leaving behind two other recruits.

Elena was found aimlessly roaming the Manila pier. When a VF 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 awhile. The social worker convinced her to undergo a medical examination to help her file a case. The doctors found evidence that she had experienced blunt force or penetrating trauma.

But before Elena could pursue her complaint, the recruiter filed a case of theft 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 recruitment agency's address.

The agency owner granted the reporter an interview. When confronted about the case of Elena, the owner was furious. She threatened to file new charges against Elena, saying that Elena had to prove that she was raped. She also denied that she was going around the provinces to recruit girls, and stated 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." She claimed that she had handed the minors over to the police.

The owner also denied having any recruits who had experienced sexual abuse. When the reporter started to discuss Elena, who had 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 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 of returning home to her loved ones in her province. "I really wanted to go home. If no one had helped me, I would have just tried my luck at the pier," Elena said with a sigh.

Radio



Minda was only 12 years old when she left her home in Cotabato. She only knew how to speak Tausug, having never ventured far from home or visited places where people spoke 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 Cotabato City and traveled all the way to Manila without any problems. 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 north, thousands of miles away.

They both started working for a couple in Sta. Cruz, Manila. Ahmid, however, left a few weeks afterwards and Minda didn't hear from him again. In a place where she barely knew anyone and hardly understood or spoke the language, she found herself helpless and trapped, unable to interact with anyone beyond her employers' gates. Still, she hoped that she would be able 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 the time, taking on adult responsibilities beyond her young body's capacity to endure.

Since her employers knew that Minda couldn't speak Tagalog and was unfamiliar with the city, they didn't give her any days off. Minda reluctantly agreed to this arrangement but felt increasingly trapped in the house, a prisoner of her own tongue.

As months passed, her working conditions worsened. For no clear reasons, her employers would lock 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 Minda realized that she had become nothing short of a true 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. Further, they did not pay her salary at all or give her any allowance.

Just when she thought that her situation could not become any worse, 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 upon the helpless girl.

The following morning, Minda told her employers about the abuse, but they just scolded her and ignored all her cries. Minda thought she would 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 would not get pregnant anyway. But all she now wanted to do was to escape from that place, so she devised a plan.

She had to set aside her plan temporarily because her employers developed their own tactics. They threatened to file a case against her for allegedly stealing P7,000 cash from their

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vault. She strongly denied the allegations but her sobs fell on deaf ears. Minda was kept behind closed doors for weeks.

Nevertheless, Minda's resolve grew each day and she prepared herself to bravely take the first opportunity to escape.

When Minda first arrived at the VF safe house, she preferred to be alone but she eventually gained her confidence and became an effective counselor to other victims

This was a difficult time for her, since often when she thought of running away, she was overpowered by fears stemming from her 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.

But then one day, when her employers ordered Minda to run an errand outside the house, she mustered all of her courage, approached a neighbor and told her about her ordeal. The neighbor took pity on her and immediately brought her to a barangay official.

VF learned of Minda's escape through Bantay Bata 163, which the local official contacted. A medical examination conducted by the Child Protection Unit of the PGH 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, however, she regained her confidence through regular counseling, processing seminars and listening to similar stories of other 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

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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 abusive situations like the one that she endured. She's trying to learn a new language by listening to the radio.

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 some time, her father, who was a farmer, remarried and had three more children.

Marinela tried to take 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 returned to the province.

The 13-year-old Marinela learned the ropes of domestic work from her aunt, a seasoned domestic helper. Marinela had to do the laundry, clean the house and take care of a child, all for 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 and who took an unwelcome fancy to her. 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. Afterwards, Marinela decided to just run away.

She managed to get help from some 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 was never paid.

Marinela's 9-year-old ward was taller and bigger than her. The child constantly 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 while 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," Marinela recalls. But she couldn't complain because the parents said that their daughter was 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 endured this situation for a year and a half. Then one day, she mustered enough courage to confront her male employer, demand her unpaid wages 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 he would tell the police a different story and claim that she had stolen money from them, thus causing Marinela to be arrested.

"They are a well-known family. He also showed me his media ID," she said.

When her female employer returned 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 neck and submerged her face in the soapy wash-basin.

After that, the couple ordered the family driver to keep an eye on Marinela because she might try to escape. One day,

When Marinela mustered enough courage to confront her male employer, demand her unpaid wages and ask to be allowed to leave, he just slapped her with a slipper

when her employers were not around, Marinela pleaded with the driver to let her go. The driver, who knew of her situation, took pity on her and assisted her to escape. Marinela wasted no time and ran as fast as she could. She went straight to the barangay hall where she reported everything that had happened to her.

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

Marinela was turned over to VF's custody. 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 to Dubai, United Arab Emirates to work as a saleslady.

Tarpaulin

For 17-year-old Girlie, coming to Manila was her only chance to find her mother, who had left her in Davao del Norte after a



failed marriage. Holding on to her mother's promise that she would support her college education, Girlie, who had just graduated from high school, took the risk of leaving her 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 for which she was not prepared and never expected to experience.

Girlie's experience traveling from Davao to Manila was a bad sign of unfortunate things to come. Through their neighbor, Reynante, a recruiter, Girlie traveled by an '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 jeepneys' floors, where some of the recruits were seated. Some were placed in the cargo area on top of the vehicles' roofs, where luggage was used to secure them. Reynante rationed out 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 get out. They had to endure this situation 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,” Girlie recalled. (“It was nauseating. Since we could 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.”)

But that was not enough to discourage Girlie. Upon arriving 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 had not been her goal. 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 to call her “*bobo*” (foolish) and “*tanga*” (stupid) every time she would make mistakes in operating the appliances at home. She was not even allowed to go out. Disappointed and hurt, Girlie requested to be returned to her agency.

Girlie and the other recruits packed in the jeepney were declared as “cargoes” when they boarded the ferry in Samar

She was employed again, this time as a babysitter. But this job also proved to be unfit for her since she 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 into 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 the job that she hailed as her "saving grace" turned out to be the worst one yet, 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," Girlie painfully recalled. ("Every time I would serve drinks and food, men would whistle and touch me. I felt like I was a woman with no morals.")

The third job that Girlie hailed as her "saving grace" turned out to be the worst one yet, as she was forced to work as a waitress in a restaurant-bar

After only a week, Girlie 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 at the agency. The ventilation was also poor. Making matters worse, Girlie and the rest were not allowed to go outside unless they had been hired for another job. They were given one other option but it was even more difficult: to pay the agency P7,500 so that they could leave for good.

Worried that she might be forced to work in another bar, Girlie pleaded to be set free, but to no avail. Fortunately, one of the recruits was able to escape and reported the situation 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 VF for assistance and temporary shelter.

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

"Sobrang malungkot ako kasi hindi ko man lang nakita ang nanay ko na siyang dahilan ng pagpunta ko sa Maynila," Girlie said. *"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 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 at further risk, I might as well go home.")

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 had to undergo for a mother who never knew the risks that her daughter took just to be with her.

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 furnishings were clearly expensive. A number of vehicles were also parked inside its spacious garage. Everything boasted of the luxurious standard of living that only the well-off can afford.

Instead of worrying about the overwhelming tasks she might have to perform 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 never enough of anything, including job 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 had already gone through while still living with her relatives. Vivian vividly recalled doing household chores for her grandparents and other relatives under the harsh direction of her adoptive auntie, who was supporting the family. Her uncle could not do anything to defend her, as he had stopped working after suffering a stroke. Back then, Vivian had felt so helpless. She had had to do errands and tasks for her friends and neighbors in exchange for only a meager amount, which she spent on school expenses. After her grade school graduation,

her auntie told her that she could not afford to send her to high school.

It was then that Vivian decided to set out on her own. She accepted a neighbor's offer to work as a *kasambahay* in order to help her family and support her studies. Yet she soon found herself feeling a familiar sense of helplessness as she worked 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 would catch a few hours of sleep in the living room, but only after my employer's daughter arrived from her usual late-night parties," she says.

Although her employer could afford a luxurious lifestyle, ironically she could not seem to pay Vivian's paltry P2,000 monthly salary

Vivian was not 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. Moreover, although her employer could afford a luxurious lifestyle, ironically she could not seem to pay Vivian's paltry P2,000 monthly salary: Vivian's pay was reduced to P1,500 and the whole amount was sent to her grandparents.

To keep her sanity, Vivian sometimes used the household's phone to call her friends or to join in contests by phoning in her votes, not understanding that there were corresponding charges. Seeing that some of their phone bill charges resulted from calls made by Vivian, her employer then told her that the entire phone bill of P15,000 would be deducted from Vivian's salary.

"I couldn't take working there anymore just to pay my debt," Vivian explained. And so when she was asked to go out for an errand, she took the chance to ask some neighbors where she

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could find help. Somebody gave her DSWD's contact number, 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 VF for temporary shelter.

Vivian stayed at the VF safe house for three months. She initially refused to be sent back home. She insisted on finding another job in Iloilo City so as to be able to continue her studies.

It was during the Christmas season that she increasingly began to miss her family. When she couldn't bear being away from them any longer, she at last went home on the morning of December 25. Vivian's longtime wish of going back to Aklan to be with her family finally came true.

Test Paper



Leah's employers beat her severely just for hiding a test paper with a failing mark. Leah subsequently escaped from their household, but is now hiding in fear for her life. Petite and looking much younger than her 19 years, 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 of four children, excluding her stepsiblings. She was just 11 years old when her mother ran away with another man to Antipolo City; subsequently her parents both started new families of their own. Following her mother's flight, Leah lived with her father and stepmother together with her siblings and a stepsister.

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 townmate. Melinda told them that they would work in a restaurant in Batangas and would receive a monthly salary of P3,500. She added that they would be able to study and send remittances to their families. Leah's father and stepmother were likewise given to believe that the siblings would be working in a restaurant, so they gave the girls 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 two of her 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 came to the house to teach her how to dance. The group explained that they had to do this because otherwise Mommy would punish them. Then one night Leah was brought to a club to orient her to the new job that she would do. She was shocked to see a lot of nude young women dancing around the male customers. She recognized some of them; one was her classmate from Davao, while others were her town mates.

The night before her first "show," however, 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 a month. Instead, they only gave Leah a transportation allowance when they allowed her to attend the nearby school.

Leah remembers Mark as a kind man while Zeny was unfriendly. *"Masyado siyang bugnutin. Minsan mabait siya, tapos bigla na lang nagwawala. Pinagbubuhatan niya ako ng kamay, binabatukan at*

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TRAFFICKED INTO FORCED LABOR

sinasabunutan. Madalas siyang awatin at sabihan ni Mark ng 'Tama na yan!'" ("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!'")

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 had tried to hide the failed results of a test and her school report 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, not stopping until the beatings had left Leah with a 10-inch abrasion on 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 had done 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 VF for temporary shelter.

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

Video Phone



For personal entertainment, 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 panties. They would take pictures and videos of me with their camera. After some time, they would say 'we can earn from this,'" Nina vividly recalls. Later on, Jean, her employer's daughter, circulated the photos and videos to her friends. Soon after, Nina escaped and, after almost getting lost in the city, 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 finished my studies, perhaps I would be able to find my father," she says. Life in her native mountains of Ilocos, in the northern part of the country, had always been harsh, and Nina had never so much as 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 wanted to work in Manila as domestic workers," Nina recalls. "I was one of those who really wanted to work. The woman, named Cynthia, came to our house and asked me if I wanted to work in Manila. I said

yes, so she told me she would bring me there and help me find an employer.”

Cynthia knew exactly how to convince Nina’s mother. Cynthia assured her mother that Nina would be treated well by her employers, and that money would come easily at P1,700 a month as long as Nina did the laundry and cleaned up her employer’s house.

In reality, Nina’s job turned out to be far from easy. “I would wake up early in the morning, at around 4:30 a.m., to prepare the children’s breakfast,” Nina narrates, describing an ordinary day. “While cooking, I also clean up the kitchen. While cleaning, I also prepared the clothes for laundry. After preparing the children’s breakfast, I also prepared the breakfast of my employers, who usually left at 7:15 a.m. When they woke up, I would set the table for their meal. Then I would wash the dishes after they had eaten. After that, I washed the clothes that I would have been soaking for a short time. At around 9

“I had no day off. I just did whatever they asked me to do”

a.m., I would start cooking their lunch. While cooking, I continued washing the clothes at the same time. I also bathed the pet dogs. After cooking and doing the laundry, I would iron the clothes that I had washed the previous day. In the afternoon, I would clean up the house again and scrub the floor.”

Nina’s only real opportunity for rest came when she took a bath. After taking her bath, however, she would 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 did whatever they asked me to do,” Nina said.

Despite her grueling daily routine, Nina got along well with her employer, who eventually went to the United States. Her real problems started when Jean, her employer’s daughter,

brought home her friends from the neighboring boarding house, who took an interest in Nina.

“When 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 me my salary,” Nina said. She only yielded to their demands because she was afraid to lose her hard-earned pay, which she needed to send back home and to save for her studies.

“They would start undressing me and would take videos 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, but eventually I would simply give in because I couldn’t fight them,” she said as she demonstrated how the group would force her to pose.

This degrading form of amusement continued for some time, with Jean physically abusing Nina whenever the latter refused to cooperate. “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 humiliated and disgusted, but she could do nothing but cry. She had nobody to talk to and was afraid that no one would believe her. The abuse happened a number of times until Nina finally learned how to say no. “I felt so dizzy. But they just shook my head; my head was spinning... While I was lying down, they pulled my legs up and then spread them 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.

“When 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 me my salary”

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 were sleeping 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 could 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 would I go? I was afraid because I didn't know anybody who could help me. I didn't know how my friend would react. What would she tell me? Would 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.

Her friend referred her to a barangay official who brought her to the PGH for a medico-legal examination. Then she was brought to the hospital's Child Protection Unit whose staff referred her to VF for temporary shelter.

"During my early stay at the safe house, I would always cry because I thought that I wouldn't have the chance to see my family again. I had lost hope of fulfilling my dreams. The VF staff and the members of SUMAPI would always say that it's not too late to get up after a fall. They said they would 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 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 frustration. She refused to be with the other children and at times would quarrel with them, until they began disliking her too.

It was through 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,” Nina reflects. “I can 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.” All the same, Nina is frustrated by the slow resolution of her case and is thinking of just going home. Fortunately, her mother has visited her once and, along with other members of Nina’s family, is supporting her in her fight.

“I want to finish my studies so that people will not look down on me”

“VF helped me find my father, so I finally got to see him,” Nina adds. She has also become more optimistic and takes pride in being enrolled in a non-formal course in cosmetology. In addition, she is a very active member of SUMAPI.

“My friends told me that I should not give up despite what has happened to me. I experienced being poor without any education and having people look down on me. That’s why I want to finish my studies – so they will 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 ends.



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. Joyce had to muster all of her courage to brave such an escape – the same feeling she had experienced when she had tried to jump out of poverty by leaving 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 had raised her since birth.

Joyce's grandmother owned a small *sari-sari* store which Joyce helped tend during weekends. Soon, she would tend the store by herself even on schooldays because her grand-mother could no longer work. Joyce was in her second year of high school at the 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 that 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 upon her. So she decided to leave her aunt's house just to get out of harm's way.

It was clear to Joyce that she had to continue working to sustain her regular remittance to her grandmother. Without telling anyone, she therefore 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. Their employer fetched both girls from the agency. Neither of them was offered a contract nor informed of how much salary they would receive.

The girls would work from 4 a.m. until way past midnight. To this day, Joyce can still taste the sourness of the stale sandwiches they were forced to eat every day; to ease her hunger, however, she would eagerly take a quick bite of her sandwich whenever she got the chance. After all, the girls

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TRAFFICKED INTO FORCED LABOR

weren't fed any breakfast and were only allowed to rest and eat twice a day, at 1 p.m. for lunch and at 9 p.m. for dinner.

Joyce also didn't understand why her employer would always pepper her with curses and insults. Although she withstood hearing these vicious words, however, her body couldn't stand the physical abuse. Not a day went by that she wasn't physically harmed or cursed.

Joyce did not feel able to complain to her employer, and no one else could hear her cry. She was forced into silent submission. Yet in her silence, she plotted her escape, although she didn't really know how.

Finally, 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,*" Joyce remembers. ("I summoned all of my courage just to get out of my employer's house.")

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 had fled, she offered her neighbor money to get the girls back. The man refused the offer and did not budge until the VF 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' doctored birth certificates, the two minors were released to the custody of the social workers.

After spending some time at the VF 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 participating in alternative skills training with the help of the Provincial Social Welfare and Development Office of Dipolog.

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

The case studies presented in this book clearly illustrate how young women and children are forced into exploitative domestic work – from the recruitment process until they reach their workplaces. Each case also strongly illustrates why domestic work may constitute a form of forced labor.

There are, for instance, women and children who are caught unaware and placed into debt bondage. They feel “obliged” to stay with their employers even without salary because of the debts they incur prior to their employment. Moreover, they are usually threatened, 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, leaving only a slim chance to run away.

It must be remembered that while some victims, like the workers in the presented case studies, do manage to escape, there are those who are unwilling to take the associated risks and who therefore suffer in silence. They may fear reprisal from their employers, whom they regard as powerful in terms of social and economic standing.

Recruiters and Traffickers

Many recruiters in the country are not held liable for the exploitation of domestics. They are not seen as responsible for such exploitation if the employers they have supplied with the domestics happened to be abusive. Recruiters tend to argue that in case exploitation results *after* the placement, they would be off the hook because such abuse occurred within the context of the domestic's relations with the employer, not with the recruiter.

It is important to establish whether the recruiter's accountability ends when the domestic enters into a contract with an employer who turns out to be abusive. The recruiter's accountability must go beyond the mere provision of legal employment. It is still part of the recruiter's duty to ensure the protection of the domestic during the employment period. If the recruiter fails to prevent and give redress to such exploitation, then the recruiter must be equally liable as the employer who exploited a domestic worker. It is the duty of every recruiter to ensure the decent working conditions of every worker they have placed into employment. In the case of overseas employment, placement agencies should shoulder the expenses of pulling out abused domestic workers from their workplaces. Such bias is not practiced in local employment though.

The manner in which the recruitment occurs is also telling of the very purpose of trafficking. The recruitment process

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must be carefully monitored because there are already indications that the recruiter's main purpose is simply to trade and sell each domestic. The case studies demonstrate that even from the start, they misinform domestics about many crucial facts. They promise risk-free employment, although in reality there are no safety guarantees. Usually, recruiters just herd the recruits, bring them to the city, and later on disperse them to employers who come to "buy" them.

Recruiters are commonly effective by offering very attractive arrangements for domestic work that even the girls' parents cannot 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 will have to do and avoid getting into details about the work such as: the number of household members the domestic will have to serve, the working hours, and the location and characteristics of the workplace.

Moreover, recruiters don't usually give clear arrangements about the real expenses the domestic will have to pay later on, such as the finder's fee, transportation fare and even 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-strapped and are tempted to "grab the bait" to solve their economic woes. This is one way to take advantage of a victim's vulnerability.

Indeed, that is why many recruiters use other means to vouch for their integrity. Some will come in flashy attire to impress their "targets". They also brag about their track record

The recruitment process must be carefully monitored because even at the outset, there are already indications that the recruiter's main purpose is simply to trade and sell each domestic

in job placement, citing how many women have enjoyed material gains after taking the jobs offered by the recruiters.

Recruiters may be relatives, town mates or 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 in working in Manila or in any other greener pasture. Whether the recruiter is known to the recruit or not is largely immaterial because even acquaintance with one's recruiter is

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no guarantee of safe employment in the city.

Reminders while in Transit

For many victims, suspicions arise only 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 to believe 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 will usually instruct the recruits. Salary advances are also used by the traffickers to strengthen their hold over the recruits, thus binding the latter to the arrangement. The victims are forced to suffer in silence and accept their sad fate. Only a few of them are able to break free, often those who have some appreciation and awareness of the existence of safety nets that cover 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

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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. The 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 details of their children's employment contracts.³

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

Work Pains

As shown by the case studies in this book, work situations vary. The "good-looking" recruits are potential targets for prostitution. They are trained and molded for the job that will lead them to brothels, bars or other night spots populated by male customers.

Domestic work is not necessarily 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.

For instance, 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. Often they are not even treated humanely. Violence may become extreme, including physical assault,

3. *Rules and Regulations Governing Private Recruitment and Placement Agency for Local Employment*, Department of Labor and Employment.

verbal abuse and even sexual exploitation. They may also be beaten for accusations of theft and jailed without due process.

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

Many employers, who have shouldered the transportation expenses of domestic workers, often feel that they have every right to "imprison" their domestics just to get the value of their investment. There is also a notion that domestic workers are taking advantage of the free transportation and that they will leave their employers once they find better work arrangements.

The Bottom Line

The bottom line is that trafficking cases are seldom filed within the context of domestic work constituting a form of exploitation. And even when severe abuses occur in the workplace, domestics often do not take legal action against their abusers.

Labor exploitation is only vaguely understood in the context of trafficking, even though recruits are usually exploited throughout the entire recruitment and trafficking process. Then the victims are left on their own to protect themselves against further exploitation by their actual employers. Meanwhile, recruiters enjoy the exorbitant fees gained from this trade, as if protecting the recruits is not part of their business.

Traffickers often do not even see themselves as a contributing force or cause to the condition of exploitation. They are so concerned with quick profits and with dispersing

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the “goods” to prospective employers that they do not care what happens to the recruits. So in cases of abuse, it becomes the recruits’ decision and responsibility to complain or not.

Unfortunately, following the trafficking process, there are usually no contracts to speak of, and those that do exist are not honored. There is certainly no binding protection for domestics who enter into verbal agreements with their employers. Often, contracts, whether verbal or written, are seen merely as a formality to facilitate the turnover of the recruit to the employers. Abused domestics who cite agreements in a verbal contract always face the challenge of proving in adjudications that they are more credible than their employers who happen to be prominent and respected people in the community.

In sum, there are few options for abused domestics. In some instances, they try to return to the agencies but the latter do not have any formal process to look into the complaints. The usual recourse is to find another employer for the domestics. Worse, as in the case of Elena, the agency owner may blatantly tell the girl to just be a “sex worker” since she has already been sexually abused by her employer. Parents have no way of knowing what is really happening to their children; everything transpires while the domestics are totally controlled by the trafficker. Thus for many domestics, the only option left is to escape and face the hazards of the city.

While domestic workers continue to find themselves victimized by these social forces, there is only a fragmented response by official institutions. On one hand, institutions

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are concerned with stemming the flow of domestics through trafficking routes. However, they fail to take into account the exploitative practices that occur once domestics are already in households. They fail to pay attention to this because the relationship in which they are interested is that between the trafficker and the trafficked domestic worker. They see no illicit relationship between the domestic and the employer, hence domestic work is not scrutinized closely as a source of exploitation.

**The Batas
Kasambahay
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Starting Anew

The potentially exploitative nature of domestic work does not rule out the fact that there are recruiters and employers out there who treat their domestic workers humanely. 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 no single response is tailor-made to address all of these issues. A menu of programs and services is implemented to create awareness about the sector's situation and needs. Institutions are also helping the victims themselves get out of their trap, recover from their trauma and redirect their lives as empowered survivors. Rescue operations, temporary shelter, counseling sessions, psychosocial processing, recreational activities and skills trainings and workshops are vital ways to equip domestics with positive outlook as they face their lives anew. Proper monitoring of repatriated victims also helps prevent re-trafficking.

As mentioned earlier, the Philippines signed ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labor only in 2005. Massive awareness-raising about its nature and legal implications therefore needs to take place on the ground, especially as there is no domestic law

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that concretely defines all forced labor as a criminal act, nor are there relevant provisions to penalize all forms of forced labor.

In this light, the Philippines must study existing laws to determine if they give justice to the principles of the Convention. The Batas Kasambahay is an opportune legislation that will address the forced labor dimensions of trafficking. The Batas Kasambahay, otherwise known as the Magna Carta for Domestic Workers, has been pending in Congress for ten years now. The longer the enactment of this law is delayed, the more pervasive abuses of domestics would remain unpunished and be treated as freak incidents reported in the media.

Establishing a clear and definite link between trafficking and forced labor therefore remains a big challenge for the justice system to address. But it is not impossible. May the life stories of our domestic workers, however painful, challenge us all to action.

