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Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Trafficked Girls: The Laura Vicuna Foundation Experience

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BEYOND SMALL STEPS

Lessons from the Field

**REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION OF TRAFFICKED GIRLS
THE LAURA VICUNA FOUNDATION EXPERIENCE**

Sr. Ma. Victoria P. Sta. Ana, FMA

**First Interdisciplinary Conference on Human Trafficking
University of Nebraska**

INTRODUCTION

It is a great opportunity to be part of this historic First Interdisciplinary Conference on Human Trafficking organized by the University of Nebraska. Thanks to Miss Hoa Tu Dhong and the Global Fund for Children for bringing me here in this august gathering.

The poverty of the Philippines and the scarcity of employment opportunities have driven Filipinos to seek overseas job opportunities. Filipinos are everywhere in the Middle East, East Asian Countries, Europe and the United States. The migrant workers are hailed by our government as the new heroes of the Philippine economy, but at what cost?

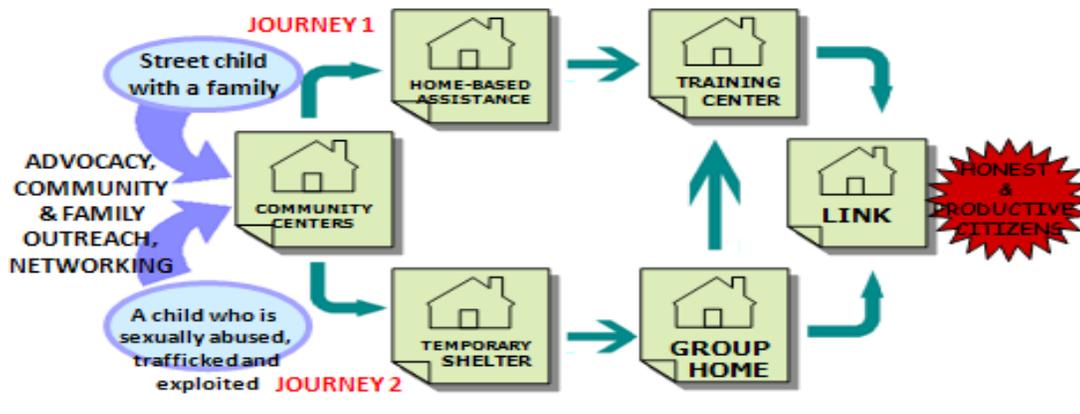
Currently, the Philippines is one of the largest migrant countries in the world. It is said that there are 3,700 Filipinos leaving the country each day to seek greener pastures. Out of the 7.41 million Filipinos living and working overseas, 1.62 million are irregular migrants and are suspected victims of trafficking or smuggling.

Poverty greatly affects the capability of parents to provide for their children. The children are forced to work to augment their parents' income. Of the 31 Million children in the country as of 2001, 4.2 million are child laborers, 147,000 are children living away from home who were engaged in permanent jobs or business; 60,000 are reported to be sexually abused.

LVFI's JOURNEY OF HOPE

The Laura Vicuña Foundation, Inc (LVFI) was established in 1990 in response to the needs of the street children who struggle to survive the deprivations and dangers of living in the streets. Through the decade, the plight of street children spawned more serious circumstances of sexual abuse, working minors, trafficked girls and related problems of exploitation and violation of the law. There were many NGO's serving the sector but they were band-aid solutions. In 1994, the Board of Directors of the Laura Vicuna Foundation has tasked me to come up with a masteral thesis for a sustainable development program for streetchildren and those in difficult circumstances. After an evaluation of the sector and the Foundation's work, I have drawn a multi staged program known as the "Journey of Hope" approved by the academe. The Journey set a modified approach for each Center to address a specific problem but implementing a comprehensive package of services comprising protection, prevention, developmental, treatment, rehabilitation and reintegration in view of helping them become good Christians, honest and productive citizens.

Journey of Hope



Its complex of centers was established and kept in operation with defined scope of services to address the various problems affecting the children. As the children are served in a Center or may have to move on to the other Centers, it comprises the Journey of Hope for them to undergo the needed growth and development and eventual liberation from difficult circumstances that engulfed their life.

THE SALESIAN SISTERS ACCOMPANIMENT OF THE TRAFFICKED PERSON THROUGH THE PREVENTIVE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

How can one keep a trafficked child recover and heal as a healthy survivor from their traumatic experiences? This is a question we have to grapple with day-in and day-out at the Laura Vicuña Foundation, Inc. Here are 3 cases in point showing the different journeys each child takes depending on her family's functioning:

Journey 1 – Story of Ana- a survivor served thru the family and the community-based program

Ana, a 20 year old child trafficked survivor, presently working at a 5-star hotel in Manila recounts how at 14 years old, after the death of her father, she had to be a child laborer at a sardines factory in Victorias City, Negros Occidental, and how one night on her way home thru the sugarcane fields, she was dragged in the cane fields, was raped and bore a child at 15 years old. Her family was supportive. She continued to attend classes even if she was pregnant. They took turns to take care of the child until she had to drop school. LVF social workers counseled and encouraged her being an LVF scholar to enroll at the Laura Vicuña Foundation's (LVF) Alternative Learning System (ALS) for child laborers.

To support her child, she was trafficked to Cebu at 16 years old to work in a restaurant. After the persistence of LVF Social Workers, she went back to Hacienda Malihao and completed her modules, took the government equivalency exams and passed it, affording her a high school diploma. She was the only ALS graduate who was recommended by the social workers to the LVF 5-month training on Youth Career Development Program (YCDP) in Manila. A month before the YCDP graduation, the Dusit Thani Hotel, Manila already hired Ana.

Journey 2 –Story of Agatha- survivor served in the LVF center based program

Agatha, an 18 year old trafficked survivor narrates how her mother wants to get rid of her at her tender age. She wrapped her in a Styrofoam and left her drifting away at mid-sea in Samar where local fishermen, also relatives, rescued her. When she was 14 years old, her aunt sent her to Manila to work with her uncle with children and whose wife was abroad. She begged her aunt not to let her go but was too helpless when she found her things already packed bound for Manila. Aside from being a domestic helper in Manila, her uncle abused her at night. When her aunt came for a vacation from work at the Middle East, she enrolled her as Grade VI in school. Agatha asked to be rescued by the school's principal who brought her to Laura Vicuña Center. As part of the Center's recovery and healing program, Agatha was helped through individual counseling, group sessions, psychiatric and psychological treatment and other psycho-social-spiritual interventions. She is now on her Fourth Year High School under the BP-OSA (Balik Paaralan para sa Out-of-School Adult) Program of Ramon Magsaysay High School. Agatha also serves as a voice to many trafficked children as she actively participates in various forums and activities offered by LVF and other agencies

Combination of Journey 1 & 2 – Story of Ada-survivor served in both LVF Center-Based and Community Based Program

In 2001, in lieu of DSWD Social Workers who were off duty as it was a Saturday , we fetched at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport, Ada, a 30-year old trafficked woman repatriated along with her 7 children age 13 to the youngest who was only a year old. Her live-in partner was imprisoned in Japan for drug pushing. She ran away from home in Davao to Manila, was trafficked at age 15 to Japan as an entertainer, escaped from the den and was deported to the Philippines when she was 17 years old. But on the same year, traffickers sent her back to Japan using another name.

The repatriated family were brought to our center temporarily for 3 weeks. We called DSWD regarding their repatriated clients but they only extended 63 US Dollars as assistance. What can 63 dollars do to help start rebuilding the life of a repatriated family of 8? LVF tried to locate her family in Davao, in Mindanao, but her family members went separate ways and have transferred residence.

Laura Vicuña Foundation provided the repatriated family with monthly housing assistance, counseling sessions and monitoring so that Ada can plan for her future. Ada worked as a cook for a family for over a month but she missed the night life. She went back as an entertainer in Manila's red light district bringing along her eldest daughter. She also brought a lover during the night in the house rented by the Foundation and started to neglect her children, thus making them highly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Her 3 elder daughters disclosed that they were also abused by her common-law husband in Japan so they were brought to LVC while the younger siblings were distributed to non-abusive families. They were enrolled in Grade I at the public school and took the Phil. Educational Placement Test (PEPT) since none of them ever went to school and are provided Psycho-Social, Spiritual & Educational Programs needed for their growth and development.

After accompanying Ada with continuing counseling sessions and provision of capital assistance, she started to pick up the broken pieces of her life with her lived-in partner who was deported from Japan. She now maintains a buy and sell business of slightly used clothes to support her family.

When the trafficked girls are brought to us they are depressed, passive, fearful, isolated broken and angry with the world. The harrowing experiences of coercion, abuse, control and limitation of freedom which render them at a limbo with only the present time as relevant; modifies the person's mental balance; paralyzes emotions, and erodes self-esteem. To cope with the traumas, they can surrender to emotions overtaking them during the horrible experience. They utilize defense mechanisms such as denial and psychological distancing to cope with the situation and help their threatened emotional balance. They are deeply scarred and have lost hope. The closer the relationship of the trafficker to the child, the more severe the damage. Generally, the journey towards recovery and healing for trafficked girls is never complete and is rather long depending on the age, degree of deceit and exploitation, resilience or disposition.

The Salesian Preventive System of Education:

Our congregation, the Salesian Sisters of St. John Bosco's response is the Preventive System of Education which works for young people even those who have been subjected to violence, destructive moral forces like the sexually abused, exploited and trafficked children. Preventive System is the use of loving kindness, reason and religion pervading them with a family atmosphere accompanying the trafficked survivors to regain trust in themselves, in others and in society and commit the young to daily task of drawing up their own life project.

We appeal to reason by opening them up to analyze and reflect their situations and the reality of the world today and by education. We cannot cope without the other disciplines. Our interventions are enriched by other sciences. We employ multidisciplinary team approach with psychiatrist, psychologist, social workers, religious educators and houseparents. We are on the watch less we fall on two extremes: 1) an extreme of religion without professional competence nor loving kindness; or an extreme of professional competence without religion nor loving kindness.

Loving kindness is the winning card of the Preventive System. What can win and tame the young is loving kindness expressed in unconditional acceptance of both their past and possibilities for a better future. For Don Bosco, "Education is a matter of the heart. If you don't love the young, nothing can be done for them." It is not enough that you love the young. You must make them feel that you love them. If they know that you love them, you can ask them anything and they would do it for you."

We harness in them the capacity to be open to the sacred, to an experience of God. We see that prayer has brought healing to their woundedness.

Don Bosco used to say that there is always a seed of goodness in every youth no matter his/her circumstance. The educator has to accompany them to discover it and bring out the best in that youth.

THE LVF PEACE PROCESS

The trafficked girl at the LVFI Centers have undergo the phases of recovery and healing which we call the P.E.A.C.E. Process. It is an acronym for:

- P – PROTECTIVE AND NURTURING ENVIRONMENT**
- E – EXPRESSION OF THEIR FEELINGS WITHOUT JUDGMENT**
- A – ANALYZE THEIR SITUATION AND ACCEPTING THEIR REALITY OF BEING TRAFFICKED**
- C - CLAIM CONTROL OVER ONE’S LIFE AND ASSERTIVENESS TRAINING**
- E – EMPOWER TO PLAN AND REBUILD THEIR LIVES AS IN CAPACITY BUILDING ACTIVITIES**

Protective and Nurturing Environment

The Sisters and lay professional collaborators pervade the atmosphere of our Center with love and the family spirit. If they had dysfunctional and abusive families, at LVC meaningful, caring and nurturing relationships break down the barriers of distrust and defenses which the child has built to cope with the exploitative situation. We do not realize it but the caring relationship built with the trafficked child is the best therapy itself.

Reinforce in them that You are loved, you are safe and protected here, You are important! We believe you. You are not to be blamed.

The LVFI has opted to provide trafficked children protective custody but not to undertake legal cases. In any event that the child or family decides on litigation, the legal case is referred to DSWD while the child stays at the Center for the P.E.A.C.E. process. This is so we at LVF can focus on the healing and recovery of the children. We prepare and practice the children on what to say at the court, though.

EXPRESSION OF THEIR FEELINGS

Young as they are, they cannot make sense of the harrowing experience and the betrayal of trust of the trafficker. Their sense of self is fragmented. They wallow in guilt, shame, confusion and low self-esteem. Hence, they suppress their feelings and act out in denial, dissociation, and other destructive behavior.

The Sisters and lay professional collaborators allow the child to freely ventilate their “stucked-up feelings”, pain and fears by being open, non-threatening and non-judgmental. Informal small talks, visual arts, play, recreation and theater therapy help the children come out of themselves.

ACCEPTANCE OF THE SITUATION

Psycho-social-spiritual interventions are being rendered by an interdisciplinary team made up of sisters, teachers, social workers and psychiatrist. While we accept non-Catholics in our Center, it is the spiritual formation and moments of silent reflection which help them the most. They are allowed to grieve at their losses and to ask why these happened to them. They are encouraged to write in their journals on how they feel daily or write a letter to our Blessed Mother which they put at her feet at the chapel. It is in prayer, their communion with self, others and the Creator where they find solace

and the strength to accept and reckon with their broken situation and not blame themselves for the abuse.

The children identify their support system or people who will support them in repairing their self-esteem and their journey towards wholeness. The Sisters and lay professional collaborators accompany the child and the non-offending family member in the conflict resolution and in attaining peace.

While the families may be problematic, we make them our allies and see them as a great resource in the recovery and reintegration of the children.

CLAIM CONTROL OVER ONE'S LIFE AND ASSERTIVENESS TRAINING

This is characterized by regaining of internal strength, resilience (I am, I have, and I can), network and support to overcome further trauma and restoring their self confidence, positive self-functioning and standing to their exploitative experience without blaming oneself.

Capacity building programs are given them like Life Skills (communication, conflict management, problem solving skills) and protective behavior for the prevention of sexual abuse.

EMPOWERING THE PERSON TO REBUILD THEIR FUTURE

Empowerment is our goal for trafficked victim survivors. Having gone through the P.E.A.C.E. process and achieving a sense of empowerment, it is vital that child be helped to move onwards to a future filled with hope and promise. The Sisters and lay professional collaborators help the child chart her life path, gain productive skills or a profession where she can best contribute to her family and nation's development efforts.

PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Prevention programs are the best antidote against Trafficking. Faced with the damaging effect, the long, tedious, difficult and very costly process of rehabilitation, Laura Vicuña Foundation has embarked on prevention strategies partnerships, information education campaign and advocacy against sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking at the grassroots communities, schools, youth, malls and church groups.

LVF works in partnership with the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP) since 2006 in conducting seven (7) trainings among Religious Sisters in Asia Pacific to combat trafficking giving rise to the Asia Pacific Women Religious Against Trafficking in Humans (APWRATH) which is part of the global network among religious women dubbed TALITHA-KOUM who meets annually in Rome, Italy for the last two years. TALITHA-KOUM has been active in the fight against trafficking believing that it is in synergy, in networking that we can combat the highly organized and complex evils wrought by trafficking.

We benchmark with other agencies on our services and share experiences in the field to the national networks of which LVF is an active member like the Council for the Welfare of Children Sub-committee on Sexual Abuse and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CWC-SACSEC), the National Program against Child Labor-Sub Committee on Education(NPCL-SCE), the Inter-agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT) so that we recommend or support the passage of laws that are child, women, worker and family -friendly. The Laura Vicuña Foundation has been invited by IACAT to form part of the team which drafted the Philippines Guidelines for the Recovery and Reintegration of Trafficked Survivors.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Trafficking extremely damages the person's core, their dignity, self-esteem, ability to trust and capacity to develop relationships. Just as when one sees their progress or if even if a survivor is reintegrated, when there's a triggering event, it can shatter some victories gained. The neurological system of trafficked children are shaped and haunted by their harrowing experiences that these affect them for the rest of their lives.
2. It is through a loving educational relationship that is welcoming, serene, available, patient, unconditional and respectful that the trafficked girls become involve in their own growth and discover the values they possess and put them to work in rebuilding their lives. We can only accompany them in their recovery and healing. But it is the girls who plan the road they will take towards recovery and reintegration and implement them; otherwise all efforts will be in vain. The strength based approach in case management is very effective. The girls are involved in our multidisciplinary case management conferences.
3. Involvement of the trafficked survivor in self-enhancement programs and socio-civic, spiritual and volunteer groups to widen their social circle and for them for them to overcome social alienation. Healing takes place when a trafficked survivor becomes an advocate against trafficking. Peer support is also an empowering laboratory where survivors share their personal experiences, provide ideas for feasible and reachable solutions.
4. Some value added programs for the healing and recovery of trafficked survivors which will greatly impact on their adjustments of the young girls/women at their reintegration Process.
 - a. Continuing Psycho-Social- Spiritual accompaniment, counseling and life skills particularly problem-solving, decision making, stress and conflict resolution.
 - b. Educational Streams for the trafficked girls. When they are admitted to our Center, they have very low educational attainment, they have to at least finish their elementary or secondary level high school. Our strong network with school officials has helped our girls finished secondary school with intensive tutorials.
 - c. Tertiary Educational or Vocational Technical Course will provide the trainees with better employment oportunities..
 - d. Livelihood maybe undertaken by families to help them ease the problem of a start-up iniatives. The best child welfare program is strengthening the family, re-orienting their value-orientation.
 - e. Service Providers for the trafficked survivors should be well-integrated and be formative/educative presence to the girls so her interventions are part of the healing process. They meet and plan regularly for the convergence of interventions. Updating for the service providers as well as representation in the different networks of LVF keep them abreast of the latest technology. Care for the service providers as in rest and relaxation is provided to prevent burn-out.

CHALLENGES ON THE REINTEGRATION OF TRAFFICKED CHILDREN

1. Families are the ideal place to send the trafficked survivors if they are non-abusive/ exploitative. However, the stigmatization would not be easy once they return to their communities. The survivors feel that they are a cause of shame to their families. No matter how severe the damage done by their families, the children survivor nourished the dream of going back to their families, their roots.
2. Fragility of their emotions as well as relationships shatter the little victories gained. The deep traumatization at their tender years makes them abhor or vulnerable to sex & relationships. There is so much to do when the survivors are reintegrated? For how long should we accompany the girls? This is an ever-growing demand on our After-Care Program.
3. Dissemination of laws such as VAW-C Law , RA 9208 or the Anti Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003 and other related laws so that the general public will know the laws and their sanctions.

CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of the Preventive System of Education of the Salesian Sisters which LVF utilizes is a testimony to our psycho-social-spiritual complementing strategy mix as it has brought transformation to hundreds of girls served at our LVF Centers. LVF was the bagged as the best NGO in the Philippines in 2005 and placed third in the Asia Pacific NGO Awards which was held in Singapore in 2005.

Allow me to quote from the Asia Pacific NGO Awards, Celebrating Success, Rewarding Excellence, 2005 Casebook and I quote, The Laura Vicuna Foundation serves as a model for the vast majority of NGO's in Asia that is small but capable of contributing to society through their diverse and determined resource mobilization", unquote.

PEACE is not won once and for all. It is a process which the person has to strive to achieve for at every moment as one journeys through life. At our Center, we name every girl HOPE. And at LVC, we give HOPE a HOME where she can claim her dignity as God's child, chart her course and find a place in the Sun.



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