



...the cries of women....
Book 2



Compiled by
Asia Pacific Justice Peace Network
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd
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This picture was taken during the first Sunday of Advent. The upward-turned hands of the women in the shelter indicate their hope in returning to their homeland and loved ones as soon as possible.

*“We commit ourselves to work zealously
with women and children,
especially those who are trafficked,
forced to migrate or oppressed
by abject poverty”*

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...the plight of Cambodian domestic workers in Malaysia...

Background

In February 2009, in answer to the cries of 14 Myanmar women who have been trafficked for labour for a place of refuge, Pusat Kebajikan Good Shepherd (Good Shepherd Welfare Centre) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia started a temporary shelter for trafficked women. Since then, this temporary shelter has provided refuge for other migrant women who have been trafficked or experiencing gender based violence. In March 2011, following the closure of an NGO shelter for trafficked women, PKGS took over its existing residents and converted its temporary shelter to a permanent programme.

Story 1

CC is 20 years old and single. She came to Malaysia using her sister's name and age as she was underage at point of being hired. Her parents are farmers and she has 3 other siblings staying with them.

The agent went to her house to recruit her and she was promised a lot of money. She was trained for 6 months in Cambodia before coming to Malaysia. The salary promised to her was RM550 per month with 6 months deduction. She worked for about a year and seven months. She did not receive any salary. Her employer made her clean 3 houses a week (on rotation basis). She would start work at 5am and was not given any day off. There was not enough food given to her. Her employer would beat and slap her and had thrown water at her. She also said that hot curry was thrown at her. As the physical abuse increased, CC finally took matters into her own hands. She asked for help from a neighbour's domestic worker who advised her to make a report at a police station. She left the house and went directly to the police station. She was sent to the Embassy by the police. The Cambodian Embassy assisted her in claiming a full 2 year salary with 6 months deduction by agent. CC was interviewed by Human Rights Watch during her stay in our shelter.

Story 2

SP was interviewed on 2 occasions but we were not able to get a coherent story from her. She was confused on dates and timelines and was not able to answer questions directly. Here's her story. SP is 24 years old. She is semi literate and has only 1 year of schooling. When she arrived in Malaysia she was taken directly to agent's office. Her passport was taken from her at this point. She was made to sleep on the floor in the agent's office for about 1 week.

According to SP her first employer was a couple, a grandmother and 4 children. She worked for about 1.5 months and was returned to the agent as she did not get on well with the grandmother. She was also sick. She spent 2 weeks in the agent's house doing housework. Whilst she was working with the agent she was also sent to work in the house of the agent's "auntie". She told the agent that she wanted to stop working and go home. The agent told her that her mother would have to pay the agent USD750 based on USD150 X 5 months of her salary if she insists on going home. During this period, she was allowed to call her mother once. She told her mother that she wanted to return home but agent is demanding USD750.

Her second employer was a cleaning agency where she was sent out to clean clients' houses for short periods of time. This continued for about 6 months.

Finally a more permanent arrangement was made for her to work with a family. She was treated well but was not able to continue working with this family. The reason being, she could not tolerate the smell of pork that the family cooked in the house as she is a Muslim. The employer then took her to the Embassy where she was referred to us.

Story 3

ST is 29 years old and single. She comes from a poor family and had worked as a seamstress. She was introduced to her agent by an acquaintance. She was trained for 4 months before being sent to Malaysia.

She arrived with a large group of domestic workers who were divided into smaller groups when they arrived to be distributed to various agencies in Malaysia. She was sent to work for a family with 10 members. She was made to work from 4.30am and sent to clean 2 other houses during the week. There were days when breakfast was just a glass of water and lunch was irregular. She did not get any days off.

ST was physically and verbally abused. She was hit on the head with a frying pan, pinched and beaten on her legs with a piece of wood. Her employer cut her hair very short and tore at her clothes. She had her ears pulled and her eyes poked with fingers. When she arrived at our shelter there were blue-black marks on her legs, stomach and her head had some swelling. Her employer also threatened to call the police about her several times.

However, the abuse got worse, and after 7.5 months she finally fled to the police station to make a report. With the help of the Embassy, she was able to claim 1 year of salary + compensation before returning home.

Story 4

TK is 34 years old and single. She comes from a poor family and was promised MYR500 when she left. However, when she telephoned her family she was told that they had not received anything from the agent. The salary promised to her was RM550 per month with 6 months deduction. She remembers that she arrived in Malaysia sometime in January 2009 and has worked for about 2 years and 3 months.

The family that she worked with comprised a young couple and parents of one of them. No day off was given. Her employer was good to her and she worked for the period mentioned above. For 2 years her salary was paid to the agent. When she completed her contract the agent did not pay her. But for the extra 3 months she was paid directly by her employer. After the 3rd month she returned to the agent anticipating her salary and return home. However, agent told her to hold on and did not do anything. After 2 days, she ran away to the Embassy seeking help. With the help of the Embassy, she was able to claim her salary and returned home.

Note: The agent had booked her on the same flight as the agency's staff. TK was very frightened and worried but we had arranged for an NGO to meet her at the airport.

Story 5

TS is 22 years old. Her father is deceased. She lived with her mother before coming to Malaysia and her family comprises of 5 siblings. TS is the third child in the family. She was picked up by an agent upon arrival. She was put up in the agent's house for 3 days before she was sent to her employers. She does not know the address of the house. Employers were an elderly couple whose grown up children would visit them but did not stay in. She worked for this couple for 2 months.

According to TS the wife did not like her and had hit her on the head with a ladle and also kicked her on 3 occasions. TS requested to be sent back to the agent but employers refused to do so. Finally, she decided to run away in the middle of the night. She was picked up by a man, who took her to a secluded place and was raped twice. After the man left her, she continued walking. She was in a daze and was crying. She was then approached by another man who took her to his house on a hill. The hill seemed to be a rubber estate as she had described the act of tapping rubber by the man. The house is made of wood and stood on stilts. She stayed with this man for 3 months in which time he saw to her basic needs of food, shelter and clothing. She said the man treated her kindly. I asked her if she was sleeping with this man, she said "no".

After the 3rd month, some policemen had come to the house and she was taken away to a police station. She is unable to explain why the police were there in the first place. According to TS, her benefactor had gone to the police station and had paid the policemen RM200 to get her released. 5 days after the police incident, TS decided to run away as she did not think that the man she was staying with could help her. She was found walking on the road by a man who could speak Khmer. This man helped her to contact the Embassy where she was referred to us. We took TS to the clinic for a general check up. Doctor found her to be in good health. An ultra sound was conducted and we were informed that client may be 34 weeks pregnant. She has indicated that she does not want the baby. Her family will also reject the additional responsibility as she comes from a very poor family.

The following sharing is by Wilhelmina Mowe, Director of PKGS, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

What were we thinking of when we said yes to the opening of our doors to the women last March 2011? We certainly did not expect to see 39 women coming through our doors. We certainly did not expect to hear the horrifying story of the woman who was raped when she sought help from a stranger she met after running away from her abusive employer. We certainly did not expect to journey with the woman who was so badly beaten up that she forgot how to speak in her own language. Each day we struggle with the demands of the women who come to us. Sometimes they are so traumatized that a simple touch on the hand makes them flinch. Each day we laugh with the women who are able to find joy in sewing a simple skirt for themselves. Each day we are amazed by women who are able to say they forgive their abusers.

We have seen how these women change in the short period of time that they are with us. The easiness in the relationships built with us and the trust that they have shown has been exceedingly rewarding. We were told that there are about 30,000 Cambodian women working in Malaysia and that 70% of women returning home feel happy and rewarded for their work done here. What we are not told is how many are abused and how many have died. In the recent case of a woman found dead outside her employer's house, not a word was whispered in the local newspapers.

Many women do not report of the abuses they suffer nor do they attempt to run away as they do not have the capacity to do so. Many are oppressed by their agents and many are ashamed. Statistics do not speak of these women. So did we do the right thing in opening our doors and did we do right to the women? We hope that we have, as we know the choice was not made by us but for us.

*....trapped, raped, forced into prostitution,
smuggled drugs, threatened....*

At the age of sixteen, I befriended a girl of my age. She used to come to the boutique which was near at our house, and always speak to me. As time went on we became friends.

One day she invited me to go on a trip. With the permission of my parents I joined the group. There were 4 boys and both of us. On our way back the boys took lots of alcohol. When we reached Colombo it was very late in the evening. They suggested that we would spend the night in a house of one of the boys. I resisted the idea and expressed that I want to go home but they did not take any notice of that. At the end by force they took me into the house. No one was in the house except us. They gave me fried mee and Coca-Cola. While I was drinking I felt some difference in me, my legs were helpless and I could not raise my head properly. Then my friend asked me to lie down on the bed. After a little moment I felt someone was touching my body. Nobody was in the room with me except a boy without a shirt. I got scared. Then he said that from today onwards you will be with us. When I cried and said that I want to go home he slapped me and said, "If you do not obey us we would kill you and your mother". I got so frightened. Then and there he raped me and gave me a pill to swallow. From then I did not know what happened.

After a few days I realized that this group is an underworld group. I did not know that my friend also has been using cigar, arrack, ganja and heroin. Even though I did not like it I had to use them all. They changed my name, cut my hair and tinted it. They dressed me in short dresses. They took me to the clubs and sold me to very rich men. For a day 3 to 4 men used me. They received 4000.00 to 5000.00 rupees from each man but gave me very small amount. They also bought new clothes for me to wear.

Other than the prostitution, they used me for heroin business. They kept heroin below my knees and tied it to my legs then they gave me to wear the denim trousers to wear. They also kept heroin around my chest and bandaged it. Otherwise I was asked to carry the heroine in my socks. I travelled by a discovery bike with another boy.

I did all these things because I was afraid that they will harm my family members. I was living under the pressure of the police, underworld and my family. I was really helpless. Once in a way I was asked to go home but unable to tell them the truth.

One day when they took me to a rest house the police caught me and those boys. After 14 days they were released. I was sent to Nisaladiya Sevana. When I came to Nisaladiya Sevana I came with fear. But the way the Sisters welcomed me, took away all my fears. I was accepted like their own child though I am a Buddhist they did not consider what I had done in my life. That acceptance helped me to change my life and to realize my self worth. I myself was surprised, the way my life changed here in this house.

At Nisaladiya Sevana there are many activities which provide to build our life once again. They are non formal education, sewing, computer, dancing, contemplative art, moving meditation, group therapy called morning meeting and counselling. I like dancing very much because it helps me to develop my own talents. The other activities also help me to forget my past. Contemplative art helps me to relax and to express my inner struggles. Also I was helped by sisters who give counselling. Every weekend we play games and watch educational films.

In this place I received the love, security which I did not have from my family. I live here very happily. I am able to forget the past and to begin a new life with new hope. My aim is to stand on my own feet and face the future courageously. I am very grateful to the Sisters who support me to enter this new life.

Nisaladiya Sevana is a rehabilitation programme run by the Good Shepherd Sisters for young girls and women trafficked and used for sex trade. Here they are helped through various therapies and activities to be healed of their past experiences and move towards a better and secure future.

....deceived into the sex trade....

Deer is from the Province of Sisagate. Upon completion of her primary education, she went to Bangkok, to work and periodically return to her mother's farm to help out. At sixteen she had her first child and the second, three years later. She maintained her livelihood by selling desserts borrowing money when her business was poor. Eventually her business failed. With mounting debts to repay, she worked in a shrimp farm, and as a bus conductor in Bangkok and alternating again between the mother's farm and her work.

She befriended a woman who one day exclaimed that she empathized with Deer's difficult life and would like to help her. She explained that Deer could work as a waitress or as an assistant cook or a shop assistant in Bahrain. A passer-by who overheard their conversation exclaimed that it sounded like an excellent opportunity. (This 'passer-by' was conspiring with the woman).

That woman handled her travel documents. Two months later, she landed in Bahrain with a debt of 90,000 baht for the transportation and documentation costs. The only available vacancy was working as a sex worker. On her first day of work, she received 20 men. Soon, she fell ill but was forced to continue working. She lived in a small room with 14 other Thai women, with no fixed working hours. Work began the moment a customer arrived. They had to catch up with their sleep whenever they were not working. Unfortunately, the women did not trust each other. They often lied and cheated each other. They even fought for the food that was given to them since there were no additional servings when it finished.

She was supposed to receive 1,000 baht for each customer she attended to in addition to working off her debts. With her documents withheld, no money and unable to speak English in a foreign land, Deer had no choice. She never received any payment and her tips were confiscated. Nevertheless, she managed to secretly accumulate 4,000 baht worth of tips. She was told that her debt would never be cleared no matter how much she could earn for them, as it all depended on her boss. Her situation seemed hopeless.

One night, she dreamt that she returned to Thailand and visited her mother. Seeing her mother again was her motivation to go on living. A month later, a woman who had escaped from the brothel sought help at the Thai embassy. The Thai Embassy subsequently rescued all the women and eventually assisted them to return to Thailand. At the Bangkok airport fearing that she might be associated with the brothel or be deceived again, she promptly took a taxi home to safety. Deer advises those who wish to go abroad that reality might not be the rosy picture that they envision. People even Thais could not be relied on for help or empathy. For such people, money rather than human relationships is the most important thing.

...forced into prostitution....

Mrs. Shobha aged 30 years is from Karnatka state, Bjiapur District. She comes from a very, very poor family. Shobha was a desolate woman and had to struggle everyday against the harsh realities of life. When she was about 17 years old she was sold to someone in Bangalore. Then she was forced into prostitution there. Meanwhile a man came to her rescue and brought her back to the village where she got married to him. But her struggle did not end here. He was a drunkard and a T.B. patient. She has got three girls. Two years back she lost her husband. When she lost her husband her in-laws started treating her badly, blaming her for their son's death. Meanwhile, her sister-in-law who is a Devadasi, staying at Bhiwandi (Mumbai) red-light area, brought her elder daughter to the red-light area, promising her that she will send this child to study. But she did not.

Last year, Shobha was also brought to Bhiwandi red light area by her sister-in-law, saying that she has a provision shop in the area and she can help her in the shop. But when she reached the area it was a different situation. She found out that her sister-in-law is the brothel keeper. It was a second shock for Shobha. For sometime her sister in-law used her for all the house work. Slowly she tried to force Shobha into prostitution but she refused. Shobha was beaten and tortured every day. She was a slave under this woman, her sister-in-law. One night there was a big fight between them and Shobha was very badly beaten up. That night itself she ran for her life and went to her aunt's house in Bjiapur. By this time all her children have landed themselves in the red light area. They were roaming in the area. The Good Shepherd Sisters', Virar rescued all of them and brought them to the shelter. They are attending school now.

From the time Shobha landed in Bhiwandi the Sisters have helped her come out from the area, but it was a great struggle for Shobha to get out from this woman's hand. After this entire struggle through the Sisters' constant intervention she has started a new life. Now we have given her a job in our own institution. She is doing well and happy.

...trafficked and served as a sex worker...

Here's an interview with Sang 42 years of age. She comes from the Province of Phijit. She is the second of nine siblings.

Would you relate your experiences of being deceived to work abroad?

- I was tricked into becoming a sex worker abroad twice.
- I first went to Taiwan to work as a seamstress. However, I was very lowly paid.
- My second trip abroad was to Korea where I again worked as a seamstress. Instead of receiving a salary, I was given only one meal a day. In addition, I was physically abused when I was perceived not to have worked hard. For instance, I was scalded with a hot iron on my arms and legs.
- Furthermore, I had to work as a sex worker at night to earn money. I start working from 9pm but stopped at 12 am to avoid police detection. On my first night, I had to serve 10 clients in 2 hours.

How did you get to Korea?

- My transvestite friend introduced me to work in Korea, exclaiming that the pay in Korea was very high. However, what I was told was far from the truth.
- I had a visa for one month. Besides being a seamstress I was also made to promise that I would service 50 customers and would find new women to enter the sex trade. If I had more than 230 customers, I could cease working as a seamstress.
- I was not in a position to choose my customers. Instead, I had to work like a machine.
- I worked in Korea for half a month. I escaped when I had saved enough money for my flight ticket home.
- Since I was familiar with the procedures, I travelled to Korea as a sex worker on my own several times. Whenever I was caught by the police, I simply changed my name. Another way to get around the problem was to return to Thailand and report the loss of my passport to the police. Then, I would be able to travel again with my new passport.
- My third trip abroad was to Singapore. Working conditions were the worst there. I had to service 230 customers to clear my debts. Instead of giving me the full sum of money I had to return, they simply stated my debts in terms of the men I had to serve.

What were the working conditions like in Singapore?

- I worked in the area previously used to train soldiers in military exercises.
- When we ran from the police, some of us fell into the air raid shelter and many died.
- I slept with my customers on a garbage bag on the ground in a forest.
- Most of my customers were Indians, Bangladeshis and Thais.

What was your family life like in your childhood?

- My father and his younger brother raped me when I was 11 years old. I was very hurt that my own father would do that to me.

Are you married and do you have children?

- Yes, my first husband was a Thai of Chinese ethnicity. We had one child.
- My second husband was from the province of Trat. He forced me to have intercourse with him after which we got married. We lived together for 8 years during which he had several women. I had to work very hard to earn enough to pay for the legal fees needed in getting a divorce.

Please tell us how you landed in prison?

- My husband handed me some collateral security documents. Without knowing anything about it, he insisted that I sign them. Later, I was arrested by the police and was told to serve a 6 month jail term. I explained that I knew nothing about the matter. Therefore, I was incarcerated for only 9 days.
- I was 8 months pregnant, then.

What was your relationship with your mother?

- My mother was remarried to a violent drug addict who often had other mistresses. He also physically and sexually abused her, forcing her to have sex with him without consent.
- Hence, my two younger sisters and I moved to stay with our grandmother.
- When I came to Pattaya, my mother chided me for having a Westerner who was not rich for a boyfriend.
- My mother also hit me when she was drunk.

Have you ever physically hurt yourself?

- Yes, I attempted to commit suicide twice by hanging myself. However, I was saved both times.

What are the reasons behind your suicide attempts?

- I felt that my life was meaningless and worthless. I was also tired of leading such a life.

Now you look well and strong. Where do you get your strength from?

- The experiences in my life taught me to be so. Sometimes, I see people without arms or legs. Yet, they do not hurt themselves. These people give me the strength to go on. I am a complete and healthy individual and can do better.
- I have even learnt to sometimes give poor children food or money.

What are your dreams for the future? What do you want?

- I do not want a lot of money. I just want a house. The ground floor will be used for business purposes. The rest of the house will be rented out.

...trafficked and traumatised by war...

I am Prabha. I am 22 years old. I was born in Konavil, Union Kullam, Killinochichi, Northern Province of Sri Lanka. I have four brothers. The youngest brother is not attending school. I have completed my O/L examination in year 2005, at Akkarayama Maha Vidyalaya in Killinochichi.

I continued to stay with my family members as I was involved in household chores. On the evening of the 17 February, around 5 o' clock, a group of people of the Movement visited us. I was working in the garden at that time. They asked my mother and me to get into their vehicle. They said that they wanted to talk to me. They drove us to their office in Killinochichi, and there, they demanded that my mother should get out of the vehicle. Then they took me to a particular place which seemingly belonged to them. I did not expect any such thing. So I began to cry. I struggled to get off the vehicle but was not allowed to. They took me to their Training Base at Visvamadu. I stayed there for six days. They registered my name, took all my jewellery, and sent me to their Training Camp at Pudukudiyiruppu for 'Weapon Training' for a period of 3 months. After six months they helped me contact my parents and in March 2008 they sent me for a home visit.

At the end of it, I was sent to the battlefield at Manalaaru, in the Mullative District, where war was going on against the Sri Lankan army. In August I was injured and I was withdrawn for 15 days. Back again I was sent to fight. In November, I was more severely wounded. I was affected by the 'cluster bomb' and the shell pieces had gone into my bladder. I had to undergo a major surgery to remove them. I had 18 stitches on my stomach.

In May of 2009, a month after surgery, I was sent again to the battlefield. During that time I reached the 'Security Zone' with some members of the Movement, but I could not find my family. As I was coming out, the Government requested us to register the name of the members of the Movement. From there I was sent to the Detention camp at Pampaimadu. There I was able to contact my parents as they too had been in the same camp. They were in strict detention and not allowed to come out. It was a very traumatic experience for me. Sometime later my parents were permitted to come out and talk to me for a short time. At that time my brother who was in Vanni, had also been injured, and had to be admitted to the hospital. My mother obtained a pass to go out of the camp to visit my brother. She took the opportunity to visit me too. I was in the detention camp for 11 months, simply doing nothing until I was released as I was in the 'Handicap List'.

Finally on the 5 April 2010, I was sent to the IDP camp, where I found my parents too. It was there that I got information about the Skill Training Programme conducted by the Good Shepherd Sisters. After 8 days, I came to Ganesapuram, where I now live, availing myself of the benefit of the programmes conducted by the Sisters. At the beginning, I was mentally disturbed, and was unable to concentrate on my work but later I could pick up the training that was provided. I was taught how to work with leather, tailoring, painting and baking. The Yoga and dance therapy helped me to settle down and prepare myself for a better and fruitful future. Now I have regained my self-confidence and am able to earn some money. Due to security reasons I am staying with the Sisters and I am benefitting from the income generating programmes conducted by them.

Skill Training Centre in Ganesapuram.

This centre which is situated in the North of Sri Lanka caters to women who have been trafficked during the thick of war that was prevalent in the country for nearly 30 years. During the past two years this centre has catered to nearly 50 such young women and continues to provide psychological healing and skill training.

The Sisters and lay partners working in this centre try their very best to provide a conducive environment for growth and well being. It is indeed a joy to note that the young women who have been trafficked and traumatized by war have benefitted immensely by the programme in the centre and are continuing to be healed of their traumatic situation.

....abused by father....

Good Shepherd Sisters in Mumbai met with Barbara aged 19 years in 2010. Barbara is one of three daughters of an overly protective father. She was a bright young girl who was in the process of completing her final year of BSC. Her father was very strict and used to accompany his three daughters everywhere. They were not allowed to socialise with anyone, including neighbours and their college friends.

After college, they were expected to return immediately and are tied up in their house by their father. This took place for approximately seven torturous years. In spite of all these hardships and the chaos she went through, Barbara was very studious. They lived in isolation and were very poorly dressed. This made people who saw them at the college very suspicious.

Barbara and her sisters could not tolerate any longer and tried to seek help by alerting their teachers about their situation. Finally they managed to get help from some NGOs and the government. They escaped from their father's ill treatment. Soon the community was made aware of their terrible experience and their life became media frenzy. Their father was finally arrested.

These experiences caused the girls to be traumatised and they were placed in an asylum. Barbara responded positively to the treatment and finally recovered partially. She was then placed at the Good Shepherd Convent Mumbai for approximately two months and we gave her counselling and further treatment at our Crisis Intervention Centre. We then managed to secure her a place at the skill training centre in Good Shepherd Convent, Chennai - Marian Home. There she expanded and utilised her creativity skills by learning art and craft. She hoped to complete her studies one day. However her father had been released on bail and was searching for the three daughters. Hence, she could not return to Mumbai as her safety would be compromised. Nevertheless she continued to hope and wish everyday that she would be educated and her life would be as normal as any young girl.

Adding to the miserable life of these young girls their mother Mrs. Tresa passed away in Pune with T.B on 18th November 2010 and their father was found dead in his Meer Road residence in Mumbai on February 2011 due to starvation and loneliness.

We brought her back to Mumbai and found a small job in a company. She is able to continue to study the final year of BSC. At present she stays in our working women's hostel. She is very happy and we continue to guide and counsel her.

....mother beaten up by son....

The Struggle

The family consists of five members; mother, father and three sons. Father is a seaman and mother is a housewife. She is 55 years old. Two elder sons are doing simple jobs in hotels and the third who is unemployed creates havoc in the family. He is addicted to alcohol, gambling and join a gang. If his mother does not meet his demand to provide him with money for his addictions, he would beat her and chase her out of the house in the middle of the night.

The Support

During the mental depression of the mother, the Good Shepherd Sisters provided temporary shelter where she regained her health and self confidence to face the son. With the help of the chaplain of the Church, we talked to the son about rehabilitation. After lots of effort, the son agreed and was placed into a rehabilitation centre for treatment. At the same time, the mother was prepared to reintegrate back to her own family gradually and to continue her daily living normally. Meantime, there was a lot of improvement in the son's recovery.

The Outcome

After treatment the son returned home. However the addictions remained. He continued his abusive ways. By that time, there was a significant change in the mother. She was able to face the son's behaviour and attitude bravely. In the meantime, she kept informing us about the situation in the house and the Sisters gave her a lot of support which gave her the courage to face the struggle. The Sister with a prayer group kept her in their daily prayers at our Convent. Now she is empowered and feels happy and relaxed in her family.

....abused women face challenges in Vietnam....

Reproduced from Free Malaysia Today

August 2, 2011

Domestic violence is rife in Vietnam where one in three married women report that they have suffered physical or sexual abuse.



Feature

HANOI: When Tran Thi Thu Hang's husband saw a male servant plucking her grey hairs, he flew into a jealous rage and subjected her to a vicious 15-hour attack.

The case caught the attention of local media, not only for the extent of the brutality but also because it highlighted the festering problem of domestic violence in Vietnamese society.

Hang, 46, was hung by her arms from the ceiling and beaten with a hammer, broken beer bottles and a steel chain on July 18. To stem the flow of blood, her husband, Luu Nguyen Tan, 48, used a sewing needle to close her wounds.

Neighbours finally alerted the police and Hang was rushed unconscious to hospital where doctors said she could have died if she had been admitted any later. The case was reported to the police and Tan was arrested for "deliberately causing injuries".

Domestic violence is rife in Vietnam, according to a study released in November by the government and the United Nations. One in three married women report that they have suffered physical or sexual violence from their husbands at some time in their lives.

The problem is damaging the physical and mental health of many women, the study says.

Legislation aimed at preventing domestic violence has not brought about much change, according to some gender experts. Many blame authorities for failing to protect women.

Tight-knit society



“The laws on domestic violence do not work well in reality,” said psychologist Khuat Thu Hong, director of Hanoi’s Institute for Social Development Studies.

Hong said women are often treated as second-class citizens. Many people believe it is hard for a very well-educated woman to find a husband. It is not even socially acceptable for women to drive a motorbike when their husbands or boyfriends are on the back.

In Vietnam’s traditional Confucian culture, many people believe it is the woman’s duty to remain passive and accept any amount of abuse from her husband in order to ensure harmony in the family. The ideal of the harmonious family is often valued higher than the rights of individuals, so women face pressure to stay with abusive husbands.

“I sometimes want to go to parties with friends, but my husband doesn’t allow me,” said Nguyen Thu Nga, a media employee in Hanoi.

“He often beats me if I don’t obey him, so I don’t have much chance to go out with friends.”

Some gender experts say Western techniques for preventing domestic violence by helping women flee to new lives do not work well in Vietnam’s tight-knit society, where information spreads rapidly and social connections are strong, and not always to the victims’ advantage.

They say efforts to stop domestic violence should focus on bringing witnesses and advocates to intervene on women’s behalf within their communities.

Main breadwinners

The Women’s Union follows legal guidelines recommending that women seeking divorce go through three attempts to reconcile with their husbands, supervised by police and social welfare staff. But those procedures are complicated, and many women may suffer even worse repercussions from their husbands for trying.

In May, Nguyen Thi My Linh, 36, reportedly poisoned herself after being beaten by her husband.

“Obviously, domestic violence is challenging authorities to do more to promote women’s rights,” Hong said.

Despite being victims, most women don’t want their husbands to go to prison because their families would lose their main breadwinners and their children would suffer. Some fear they will be even more violent when they are released.

That passivity compounds the problem, said psychologist Nguyen Kim Quy from the Institute of Vietnamese Education and Psychology.

“Women’s resigned attitude is preventing them from enjoying their rights,” Hong said. “Traditional Confucian culture has existed in Vietnam for nearly 1,000 years, so it still influences people’s behaviour very strongly.”

The case of Hang reflected both sides of the dilemma.

“I don’t remember how many times he has beaten me since we started to live together,” Hang said. “He beats me for any reason and I just kept silent. The more I say, the more he beats me.”

However, after receiving news of her husband’s arrest, the tortured spouse expressed regret.

“I don’t want him to be put in prison,” she said.

...never give up on yourself...

Like many Filipinas, Jenneth Sarmuyan Owaku is a victim of domestic violence, but because of her faith in God and with the Good Shepherd Sisters journeying with her, she successfully survived the ordeal and came out victorious.

Jen comes from Aurora Province and was born on September 7, 1978. She is the third of eight siblings. Although not well-off, her family was a very happy one. Her father worked as a truck driver, while her mother was a simple housewife. Christmas was one of her fondest memories because they always gathered to celebrate it with simple gifts and a simple meal together.

The Sarmuyan family lived in a barrio, and sometimes a rich relative of her father who lives in the city would invite them to a party or to stay a few days to help clean their house or wash clothes. Jen saw this as training opportunities for her and her siblings. Graduating from elementary school, she went on to study at Mt. Carmel High School, run by Sisters, and located a distance from her home. Jen's friendly nature and good character helped her clinch a "scholarship" in the school. This meant free board and lodging in the dormitory, though it entailed some work as well. The Sisters assigned her to prepare the songs for the daily mass and to serve in the refectory of the seminarians. Her older sister, Joy, who was working in Japan, paid her tuition fees and other school needs.

On graduating from high school a Sister introduced Jen to work for a family in Baguio. She took on the offer as her parents had no means to pay for her college education. She enrolled in a Business Management course in St. Louis University. For the next two years she cared for an old woman. At times she also helped in a bakery owned by her employer. At the end of her second year, Joy, her sister, having returned from Japan asked Jen to return home for a vacation. Jen jumped at the opportunity as she was feeling tired being a working student. She was finding it increasingly difficult to study as her work schedule became quite heavy.

Many changes had taken place in her home during her absence. She noticed the many new things (appliances) that her sister had bought for the family, which of course made her glad. However she was also saddened by a new development which affected the family relationship. The simplicity of her family seemed to be slowly disappearing. It was perhaps because they got used to receiving big sums of money sent by Joy from Japan. Her parents who were not seen to be quarrelling before now quarrelled regularly. One of the reasons was that her father did not want to work anymore and had begun drinking excessively. This situation got worse when he started hitting Jen's mother and was said to have another woman.

Before Joy returned to Japan she took Jen to Makati to look for a job. The situation in the family and the need to earn money to help her younger siblings compelled Jen to go with Joy. After they secured an apartment Joy disclosed that their mother would leave their father and together with the other siblings would join them in Makati. Joy then introduced Jen to the owner of the karaoke bar where she was working and Jen got a job there right away. She felt safe because Joy was there and her sister's friends were very kind to her. Most of the clients of the karaoke bar were Japanese and Jen learned to speak the language. A few weeks later Joy left for Japan leaving Jen under the care of her friends.

Encouraged by a friend, Jen successfully applied to go to Japan in the year 2000. After training, she was attracted to a man who showed an interest in her. They dated for 6 months. Jen enjoyed their time together and found herself falling for him despite "his being stingy and lacking in thoughtfulness" (he never offered her anything to eat during their outings). Believing theirs was mutual love, Jen invited him to visit her in the Philippines and to meet her family. This he did, which convinced her that he really loved and cared for her. Jen accepted his proposal without hesitation and they were married on August 13, 2001 in the Philippines.

A few days after their wedding her husband returned to Japan, but Jen stayed on to process her visa and in January 2002 Jen was finally able to join her husband in Japan. They stayed with her mother-in-law, and her older brother-in-law's family. All was well for the first few months. Jen enjoyed the care and love of her husband and related well with her mother-in-law. Sometime later her sister-in-law wanted them out because the house was too small for two families. During this time Jen's relationship with her husband began to deteriorate. Little disagreements led to violence and they began hitting each other. Her husband finally found a house for them after nine months of marriage. It was timely as Jen became pregnant with their first child. Jen's mother-in-law decided to move in with them. The need to have somebody to listen to her share about her pregnancy prompted Jen to go back to the Philippines during the first trimester. She stayed two months with her family before giving birth to her son, Yuki.

Returning to Japan she found her husband distant. The "close" relationship between him and his mother made her feel excluded and the quarrels resumed. He would sometimes hit her. There was a time when he dragged her down the stairs. Jen became jealous, insecure and angry. She would nag and throw or break things. The quarrels continued as her husband showed no affection for their child. A month later Jen returned to the Philippines to renew her driver's license. While she was there her husband encouraged her to stay on longer, and regularly sent gifts and big amounts of money. Clouds of doubt begun to form in her mind and she made her way

back to Japan. Jen tried to make their marriage work. She was pained that her husband and mother-in-law's relationship often was the cause of their quarrels and his violent behavior. The fact that they both did not care for her son was more painful and difficult for Jen to accept. Jen worked during the day and had to leave her son with her mother-in-law. She would return from work to find that both her husband and mother-in-law had had their dinner, but her son had not. This often led to more quarrels. The physical and verbal abuse continued and got worse in July 2006. Her husband demanded a divorce and said Jen no longer had a place in his house. He hit her so badly in front of her mother-in-law and child. Badly bruised and battered, she went to a doctor and took a photograph of herself. She finally plucked up courage to seek help of a Filipina, Ruby Momose. The latter called up the Good Shepherd Sisters, and with Aiyako Yamada, a Japanese lay associate, helped file a case in the city hall. In August she and her son were brought to a government shelter while the divorce proceeding was in process. Deep down Jen couldn't accept that her marriage would just end without her understanding the reason. She realized also that his abuses were his way of forcing her to leave him. She felt there was a reason why her husband wanted her to leave. She believed that she tried hard to be a good wife despite his battering. She wanted to know what it was that was not right. She blamed herself, at times, thinking she was the reason her husband hit her.

Unsettled, Jen ran away from the shelter and returned home. Her husband tried to make her leave but she refused. To pacify him she promised to divorce him if he would apply for her permanent residency, and to this he agreed. Jen's stay was always subjected to verbal abuse by her husband, while her mother-in-law ignored her. She was no longer physically abused as he was afraid that she would report to the police. Jen felt as if she was beginning to lose her mind and most of the nights cried herself to sleep. When she expressed anger her husband would take her pictures and continue his verbal abuse. The situation was unbearable, but the thought of her son's future and the need to know the answers to her questions made her stay on. She engaged in internet chatting to remain sane. She got to know an Australian man to whom she related her story and who became interested to marry her. In spite of this seeming good chance offered by her chat-mate, Jenneth desired to discover the real reason why her husband acted in such a cruel way.

When September came, her husband went to the Philippines for a three day 'business' trip and came back in time for Jen's birthday. He brought the whole family to a beach for an outing. Although Jen was happy, she noticed that her husband would leave them alone for a long time or would be busy on the phone with someone. A few days later while cleaning their "altar," Jen found the memory chip of their camera that contained the pictures of her husband and his Filipina lover which was taken during his 'business trip'.

In order to get more evidence she got hold of her husband's personal computer and contacted the Good Shepherd Sister and Ruby. She showed them the evidences and went to the City Hall, but the personnel there did not want to help her anymore because she had run away from the shelter. Finally, with the support of the Sister she confronted her husband, and threatened to sue him and the Filipina. Her husband became afraid and he agreed to all the conditions that Jen demanded. One condition was having Jen hold their bank books and credit cards. This would ensure that he would not support his lover. What was very surprising was when her husband told her about his large saving and yet gave her the pass book. Another condition was for her mother-in-law to go back to her own house. To this her husband hesitated but agreed. After this, Jen felt she was able to "breathe" and slowly live again.

Their reconciliation and the change of her husband's heart did not happen overnight. There were times when Jen questioned her decision for staying, but her desire to start anew made her give her husband another chance. A few months later Jen conceived again. In 2007, she delivered a healthy baby boy and named him Tomo. In spite of her husband's change Jen had doubts about his sincerity, but she slowly learnt to focus on life positively, not all the time seeking meanings to her husband's actions. This made her more relaxed and happy. She is now very grateful for the help and support received from the Good Shepherd Sisters. They awakened her and helped her realize the inner strength she has to stand up and fight for her rights and dignity when they were denied by her husband, and to recognize her mistakes and to accept herself.

Today, in spite of some apprehension, she is happy. She and her husband are communicating, and sharing the household chores as a "team". They are planning together for their children's future. In her own words: *"Ngayon naramdaman ko ang saya at gaan ng aking kalooban na walang halong pag-alinlangan dahil nakukuntento na ako sa aking buhay. Ang lahat ng nadaraan ko ay ayon sa kagustohan ng Diyos. Kahit sa panahon na ako ay naghihirap alam ko na nasa aking tabi Siya. At salamat din sa mga Sisters ngayon may direksyon na ang aking buhay na dating madilim at matinik."*

....my uncle, my disaster....

I was born and grew up in Ruteng, NTT, Eastern Indonesia, as the eldest of seven children. Growing up in a small town, we often visited our relatives and neighbours and helped those in need.

During school vacation, my aunt, who worked as a midwife, had often asked me to stay with her. I liked to live in her house, and helped with the household chores as far as I could. Once when I was in junior high school, my aunt asked me to stay because she had to attend a meeting in the city and had to be away for five days.

Over the years, I knew that my uncle cared for me and loved me. I had no reason to be suspicious of him, and so it was no different this time when I went to my aunt's place.

But I was wrong. One night he approached me telling me that he would kill me if I didn't want to have sex with him. I was really shocked and scared. In the beginning, I didn't know what he meant, but when he tried to grope my body, pull off my clothes, and grabbed my underwear, I realized immediately that he wanted to rape me. He kept threatening to harm me if I did not give in to him and this scared me even more. Even though I screamed loudly, nobody could hear me as the houses were far from each other. My uncle assaulted me many times until my aunt's return. When she got home, I left the house immediately without saying anything, and I promised to myself that I would never return to my aunt's house.

I became pregnant. I tried to hide it from my family at first, but it became impossible when my stomach grew bigger. Finally, I told them the story of what happened. Unfortunately, my family didn't believe me. They assumed that I had done it with my boyfriend. Even my aunt, my bad uncle's wife, turned against me. She hated me, and was very mad at me. And my uncle?

He chose to be quiet, and pretended that nothing happened. My mother was frustrated, angry, and embarrassed. She left town to stay with her relatives and I was left on my own to face the nightmare.

Fortunately, I gave birth to my child after I finished my Junior High School. Finally, when my child was born, my parents accepted my situation and received my child and me in their home. We decided that we would pass my child off as my mother's child and that I was therefore his big sister. I still had a chance to breastfeed my child until he was eight months old, after which I decided to search for a job in the city. My parents would take care of my son. I understood that I would not be able to see him grow up but

I didn't have a choice. In my mind, I had to make a living to keep my child alive. Leaving town also meant that I did not have to listen to mean things being said about me. It also lightened the pressure on my parents.

My suffering as a single mother

As a single mother, I endured financial insecurity and considerable stress from people around me. They thought nothing of me as a human being; as a result they felt free to insult me and ignored my feelings. In addition, in the eyes of every man, I was a prostitute so they assumed that I wanted to have sex with anybody.

Even a co-worker asked to have sex with me. I was really upset and felt depressed because he went to the extent of trying to peep when I took a bath. It made me really angry with him and with God. I felt life wasn't fair to me. I never wish to be in this situation, but again I had to be brave, to face reality.

People around me liked to jeer at me. Actually, I longed to meet someone who would really like me, and who would understand my situation. But when I tried to think of that, I felt no peace in my life; as a result I had to throw my dream away.

I just felt that that it was an impossible dream. Instead, I tried to focus on myself and my child. I accepted my life as a single mother, and brought every problem to God, my Savior. I knew He would never leave me alone. I knew He would help me and keep His spirit in my life. Now I am working with the Good Shepherd Sisters in the sewing room in Ruteng. Here I feel that I am a person who is so precious to Him.

My child has become adult

My child grew up without knowing her biological mother. When she was in high school, my family and I decided to let her know that I am actually her biological mother. I was so proud to see my daughter able to handle the difficult truth. I wish I could give her a higher education, but I know it would be difficult. I just pray that my daughter will find happiness in her life with the limited resources that we have. Lately, my family and I decided that we would tell her who her biological father is.

....the story of G....

G, a school girl of 15 years living with her parents and family, was a bright student. Her mother earned a living by plucking tea leaves in the Estate. Her sister was a domestic worker and her younger brother was attending school in custody of her uncle. After school she attended to the household chores. During the school holidays, she worked as a volunteer in a 'Day Crèche'. One of the babies lived close to her home. So, whenever possible, she accompanied her to the Crèche. By and by both of them became very attached to each other. The little child's mother was employed abroad, and her father Taj - 37 year old, was working in an Agency, his mother kept house for them.

One day an old woman asked G to go into the house and bring out a 'Red-bucket'. This was an evil plot, which she knew nothing about. She searched in vain for the 'Red-bucket' which was non-existent. In the mean time, Taj came out of his hiding and pounced on the young girl, gagged her and stuffed her mouth with some dirty rags, tied her to the bed and raped her. When she regained consciousness and she realized what had happened she started crying. Taj threatened her by showing her a knife. When she came out of the house, the old woman had disappeared. G kept all this as a closed secret until her mother began to notice some physical changes in her. Finally she told the truth, her mother then informed her father, who sought the advice from the lawyer whom they were working for. They lodged a report at the police station and Taj was arrested. The lawyers contacted the Local Leader of the Bandarawela Good Shepherd Convent and through her, G was sent to St. John Eudes Home, in Nayakakanda. Through the tender care, counselling and guidance of the Sisters there, G became friendly with the other residents who had similar experiences. She began to understand the injustices of society. When the baby was born, G had no affection for the baby. Two years later, the baby was taken to the hospital where the abuser was also there to do a DNA Test. Finally the baby was given up for adoption. G was sent for training at the Good Shepherd Convent at Bolawalana. She was thankful to all those who went out of their way to help her. She is now confident that the re-orientation programs by the Sisters will make her confident too.

St. John Eudes Home is a home which gives protection and care for single mothers who have been sexually abused and are pregnant. They are provided with an environment where they receive both psychological and medical help till the baby is born. The Good Shepherd Convent Bolawalana is a Skill and Career Development centre which caters to young women. It helps them choose a career for their future and thus equip them to find suitable employment at the end of the one year programme of Skill Training. This is mainly for those who are unable to pursue their academic education.

...Bi, a foreign bride....

Bi, from Cambodia, was 25 years old when she married a Korean through a match-making agency. She led a reasonably happy life for a year and had a son. When her son was two months old, her husband was killed in a car accident. He left over US\$100,000 dollars to her and to his son.

On learning of her large inheritance, her in-laws schemed to cheat Bi by forcing her to sign over her rights to the child and the inheritance, leaving her with only US\$5,000. They bought her a one way ticket to return to Cambodia, while her baby was put in the care of one of his aunts. Being the first time that the baby was separated from his mother, he cried incessantly. All this took place within one month of her husband's death. Bi had nobody to turn to for help in Korea, she was all alone. Her mobile phone was confiscated and she was forbidden to call anyone except to speak to her in-laws.

On the day of her departure, when left alone inside the airport, Bi cried uncontrollably. An immigration officer approached her and she could only tell him, "I have no baby, I have no money!" On hearing this Bi was brought to the Cambodian Embassy and led to 'Friendship House'. It so happened that there were Good Shepherd Sisters working in this shelter, namely, Srs. Virginia Kim and Yacobo Lim with two lay partners. With the help of a lawyer, the Sisters filed her case to the district court and they attended all the hearings.

Finally she won her case on the 24th of April, 2009. On May 21st, after 10 months of separation, Bi was reunited with her child. It was raining very heavily the day the bailiff carried out the court decision to wrest the baby from Bi's in-laws. Bi was worried about the downpour but the Sisters consoled her by telling her that chances were good that the baby would be home because of the rain. The rain stopped when the baby was brought out. The bus journey from Seoul back to the shelter took 5 hours. The baby cried throughout the journey as he missed the aunt who had been looking after him. Thankfully, fellow passengers on the bus did not complain. Instead they sympathized with the baby. The day after Bi's baby arrived at the shelter, the in-laws were at the door threatening and demanding the baby's return. The confrontation with the in-laws, in the presence of the police lasted three days but their efforts to retrieve the baby were unsuccessful.

For now Bi is back in Cambodia with her baby. She still has two more cases against her in-laws which will take another year. Nevertheless, she is very happy to have her baby with her. She plans to return to Korea to raise her child and apply for Korean citizenship. She is fortunate that her case ended smoothly. There are so many other immigrant women, married to Koreans, who are experiencing domestic and sexual violence.

....unfairly discriminated because she was pregnant....

Nurfadilla Ahmad Saikin, 29, took the government to court to seek a declaration that pregnancy cannot be used as an excuse not to employ a person as an untrained relief teacher and the revocation of the memo on her placement to be declared illegal and unconstitutional.

She was given a memo for the month-to-month teaching contract in January 2009, but this was revoked almost immediately when the district education officers found out that she was pregnant.

Article 11 of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) requires countries to protect women's rights to work, to ensure that women have the same training and employment opportunities as men, that women receive equal pay for work of equal value, that women have access to the same benefits, compensatory schemes, and allowances as men, especially in relation to retirement and incapacity to work.

The article further requires that countries prohibit discrimination in the workplace on the basis of marriage, pregnancy and maternity leave, introduce paid maternity leave without loss of benefits or career opportunities, and encourage the provision of supporting social services to allow parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities.

Nurfadilla also argued the case under Article 8(2), which pertains to discrimination on the grounds of 'religion, race, descent, gender or place of birth... in the appointment to any office or employment under a public authority'.

This is the first time a civil servant has brought the government to court over gender discrimination in the workplace in this landmark case.

Malaysia has to abide by international conventions

In a decision the High Court judge ruled that the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) - to which Malaysia became a signatory in 1995, is binding. This should set precedence for current international treaties and conventions to which Malaysia is a signatory that they are legally binding and should be observed as law.

The court ruled for damages to be paid to Nurfadilla.

Nurfadilla's husband Izwan Zakaria, who was visibly elated after receiving the decision from the judge's chambers, said, "I am just absolutely speechless and I hope that there are no more cases like this, whether in the public or the private sector." Clearly relieved, he said that it was justice at long last, after his wife having exhausted every single complaint avenue with her employers.

...with hope the journey continues....

I first met Levin when I attended an Integrated Nihongo-Tagalog Mass in Matsumoto Parish. Levin is 43 years old but looks younger than her age. She is fair skinned, soft spoken and friendly. Her friendly and unassuming ways were what drew me to her on our first meeting. Levin comes from San Miguel, Bulacan, and is the sixth in a family of ten children. Her father died three years ago and her mother who is 75 years old is living alone in a small house with a little shop in it. The house is in front of a Church in Bulacan. As far as Levin can remember her mother has been there, selling candies, toys, etc. to the churchgoers. When she was still a little girl, Levin sometimes helped her mother to clean the church.

When Levin was 8 years old, her father, on account of poverty, brought her to his relative in Manila to take care of the latter's children as well as to help in the house. Her parents thought their relative would send Levin to school, but they never did. Finally, after two years her father brought her back to Bulacan. One day, an employer of her grandmother named Marina came to their house and told her parents that she wanted to adopt one of their children. She chose Levin. Marina, though strict, was kind to Levin. She was treated as a member of the family and was sent to school. Levin stayed with Marina's family until she was 17 years old. While living with Marina, there were times during the night when Levin heard Marina teaching her children to pray. This brought her to tears as Levin, too, longed for somebody to teach her how to pray.

When Levin was in her third year of high school, she found Marina's discipline, particularly with regards to relationship with the opposite sex, too strict so she decided to run away. She went to the house of one of her classmates and stayed there until her brother came to take her away to his house to help him look after his child. Her brother sent her to school and after graduating from high school Levin decided to return home and look for a job in Bulacan. After a few weeks she found a job in a small restaurant, where she became involved with a man and eventually found herself pregnant. Unfortunately for Levin the man was married and did not want his wife to know about their affair. He gave Levin money to abort the child as well as to silence her. Not satisfied, her boyfriend along with a friend, tried to abduct and kill her.

Levin left home and found a job in another restaurant. This time she fell in love with a bus driver. They had a relationship and he brought her to Cagayan Valley. Levin hoped to start a new life but unfortunately the man was married, and seldom visited her in their rented apartment. Levin's live-in partner was a very jealous person and often accused her of carrying on with

another man. When Levin became pregnant his jealousy got the better of him to the point that he tried to kill her. Fear for her life prompted Levin to run away. She found shelter in a friend's house, and there she delivered her son.

After a few months Levin, penniless and with a new born son decided to return to Bulacan. However, she placed her son temporarily under her friend's care for she was ashamed and worried about her parent's negative reaction to her situation. But when her parents heard her story they welcomed her back with open arms and told her to bring her son home. One of her younger sisters who was, by this time, working in Japan, sent her the money to bring her son back to Bulacan. After a few weeks, the feeling of being an added burden to her parents coupled with the fact that she was unemployed and raising a son, prompted Levin to ask the help from Marina (the woman who adopted her when she was 9 years old). Marina knew somebody who was recruiting talents for hotels in Dubai and she introduced Levin to her. By this time Levin was 21 years old. She underwent a year of training, but before their scheduled departure her contract was changed from Dubai to Japan. So, Levin ended up in Japan where she worked as an entertainer in a club. She found the job exciting and paying well. She renewed her contract with the promoter thrice. However, after her third contract expired she did not return to the Philippines but stayed on as TNT in Japan. Her promoter allowed her to work. However, after two months Levin decided to run away to look for another job.

After 5 months her promoter found her and brought her back to Tokyo, and as a punishment she was made to work without pay, and then passed on from one club to another working also without pay. This lasted for a year and a half. Finally she summoned enough courage to threaten the owner that she would report him to the police if she was not released. Eventually he did and Levin was allowed to look for another job. Levin worked in 8 different clubs until she was 31 years old.

At the age of 31, Levin wanted to straighten her life by having a proper visa. The only way to do this was to marry Japanese. So when a friend introduced her to a man who said that he wanted to have a Filipina for a wife, Levin took the opportunity. They were married in the Philippines and Levin paid for all the wedding expenses. After 8 months Levin obtained her visa and returned to Japan. After a few weeks of living together Levin realized that the man had no permanent job. She had to shoulder most of their expenses and worst of all, he was bringing women to their apartment. After five years of carrying this burden Levin decided to divorce the Japanese.

The divorce meant that she had to find another way to renew her visa. Fortunately for her, a Japanese who was a year younger than herself fell in love with her and proposed marriage. Levin, who reciprocated his affection,

accepted the proposal and they were married. After the marriage Levin's mother-in-law moved in with them. This was bearable but what shocked Levin was the discovery that her new husband was a jobless drug addict. After a few months he started getting violent and physically abused Levin. In spite of the cruelty she received, Levin continued to support her husband and mother-in-law for almost a year only because she needed him to renew her visa.

Then she met the Good Shepherd Sisters who befriended her. When Levin related her story to the Sisters she was advised to divorce her husband. The Sisters offered her a temporary shelter. The advice and concern of the Sisters finally gave Levin the confidence and courage to leave her husband. She also found in the Sisters a strong support, and this gave her the strength she needed to face the future. Her husband, thinking that she would not be able to renew her visa once she was divorced from him, agreed right away to the divorce. On account of her unhappy experience under the hands of her Japanese husbands coupled with the length of time that she had lived in Japan, Levin was given a "long term" visa which she has to renew every year.

In spite of her brokenness and her painful experiences Levin was able to rise up. She is now an active member of the Parish Core Group, a choir member and recently "graduated" as a Catechist in the Parish of Matsumoto. Her past brokenness attracted other Filipinas to come to her for advice. Though she looks fragile, she is very strong not only in her faith and trust in God, but also emotionally. She said that the presence of the Good Shepherd Sisters gave her the strength and courage to start all over again, to see the goodness of God, to have faith in herself, to see that mistakes can be corrected, and that there is always a bright future ahead if one has faith in God.

When asked how she is feeling now, she said: *"Masaya, dahil malaya ko nang maipakita ang totoo kong sarili, ano man ang nangyari sa buhay ko noon. Hindi ako natatakot humarap kahit kanino, dahil alam kong mahal na mahal ako ng Diyos at nandiyan siya palagi. Naramdaman ko ang pagmamahal niya sa akin."*

Today, Levin has another Japanese boyfriend who works in a bank. He is a Buddhist but has become a strong devotee to the Blessed Mother because of Levin. He offered to beautify the Grotto of Our Lady, and every afternoon, he waters the roses planted around the Grotto.

...from rags to honour and dignity...

I believed I was born the organic way! After a hard day's work at the "uma" planting ginger on a warm summer, April of 1973, Nanang (that's how we call mother) brought me into this world. She delivered her baby at home with the help of Tatang and his older sister, Auntie Diana who lives nearby. They took care of Nanang until she was strong to take care of herself and me. They usually prepare ginger soup and vegetables as viand for mother.

As a child, I was a picky eater. I did not like to eat camote which was the staple food of the family. My parents didn't have a wide farm to cultivate for planting rice that would sustain us throughout the year. So for some months, the family had to content eating just camote with barako coffee day-in, day-out. Generous Auntie Diana though, was the one who would bring ground rice for the young children's food. Occasionally, Tatang would buy some liquid milk from the market as an alternative to the avocado tea for the younger siblings.

Before we went to elementary school, Tatang and Nanang started to train us in some household chores like fetching water, taking care of the pets and other light work in the farm. The older children were the ones doing the more difficult tasks of helping our parents in their work.

We were happy we survived elementary schooling with just a few things - a pair of slippers, few clothes for a year with baon of rice and vegetables from our parents' farm. If ever there was money, allowances were given and we would consider it a miracle!

The providence to continue high school was through Uncle Tony, one of the Barangay Officials who recommended me to be sponsored by one of the Municipal Councillors, to study in a private high school at Philex Mines. Being a "probinsiyana" many things were foreign to me. I had to learn that Sprite is a colourless soft drink that looks like water; to speak in Filipino needs to be with "po" and "opo"; to learn how to dance and move like the graceful girls do in our PE class; otherwise, my group mates will exclude me calling names like "Miss saba" as we pass carrying our "kayabang" full of farm products.

Throughout high school till first year college, Mr. Sison took care of my school fees. During first year college, I stayed with my Ninang Pat's relative then and was taken as a house help with one of the college secretaries of St. Louis University. With the help of Ninang Patricia who is an alumnae of Good Shepherd, she encouraged me to apply as a working student.

Summer of 1991, I passed the screening of working students at the MMTTC. After a few days, I entered the RVP Hostel together with eight other girls. My stay at the hostel started to put my life in its proper perspective. With the organized way of living from waking up to going to bed, I learned to value and utilize time properly.

The daily prayer time and masses made me realize my responsibilities as a Christian. Back there in my village, we only see the Priest once or twice a year.

The different tasks given to us like charges, marketing, cooking, studying instilled in me a sense of responsibility, team work, and simple financial management. The fixed budget we had taught me the value of saving and to live a simple life.

It was when I was in the third year that my leadership capability was enhanced. I became a big sister in our dorm. It was a practice for the big sisters who are in their fourth year to pass on their responsibilities to the younger ones when they graduate and leave the residence.

Though we were focused on work and studies, we always have fun during birthday celebrations, dorm outing and "crazy play time" at the dorm. We sing for the choir during Sundays at the Parish. We were also invited to sing during weddings. This was a great pride for us!

The life-changing experience I had was during our retreat in 1992, with Fr. Tom, Bro. Cris and Bro. Mike. I learned to forgive my father. For the first time I came to an awareness that my motivation for struggling to finish college was my anger. My father did not approve of my going to high school and college because of poverty and his belief system that girl children are good only for marriage and to stay home. Forgiveness, acceptance of myself and family was what I learned after the retreat.

Life in the hostel was a challenge at times. There were occasions when I would get into trouble because I was a touchy person and sometimes fall into the trap of talking about others. But for every time I get into petty fights and trouble, I constantly learn the value of respecting, understanding and appreciating the value of living with others. From the troubles and quarrels, blossomed special friendships and bonding with my friends in the hostel which I cherish up to now.

Good Shepherd Asia Pacific Justice Peace Network

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Trafficking - Migration - Economic Justice - Prostitution - Girl Child - Ecology

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*“Love and Justice bind us
to each other and to the
whole mission”*



Saint Mary Euphrasia Pelletier
Foundress of the Good Shepherd Sisters
(1796 - 1868)