

The Work of Proyecto Esperanza

Interviewed by Gerardine Daniels

Translated by Nerea Bilbatua



I sat down with Eva Serrano of Proyecto Esperanza to talk about the direct assistance that the organisation provides, with my colleague Nerea Bilbatua providing translation services. Proyecto Esperanza began in 1999 as a response by a religious order called Adoratrices to the issue of trafficking of women in Spain, a growing problem. The organisation's multi-disciplinary team has developed a comprehensive programme to support female victims of human trafficking, covering direct intervention, awareness, education and international cooperation. For further information on Proyecto Esperanza, please visit their website at: <http://www.proyectoesperanza.org/>

sensitize all actors who could be involved in a trafficking case. We provide training to the police twice a year on how to identify trafficked persons. We also travel to each district / town in Spain and talk to the local government officials about the work of Proyecto Esperanza and how to identify people who have been trafficked. Training and awareness raising is done on a continuous basis to ensure that all people who might come into contact with a trafficked person are trained on how to identify and handle such a case. In this way, we account for staff turnover in key parties. Finally, we also distribute magazines, pamphlets, and other publications to increase awareness of Proyecto Esperanza and the assistance we can provide.

What types of direct assistance do you provide?

Proyecto Esperanza takes a global approach to direct assistance. We provide all types of assistance, beginning when a woman presents her complaint and ending when she no longer needs our assistance. We provide counselling, medical

Eva has been working as a lawyer in the field of immigration since 1999. Her work has always been directed to the defence of human rights, specialising in the criminal and labour jurisdictions. In 2000 she joined the Proyecto Esperanza team to provide legal assistance to women victims of trafficking in persons for the purpose of exploitation.

How do people find out what assistance is available?

Proyecto Esperanza has done a substantial amount of awareness-raising in Spain. We also provide training to educate and

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treatment, legal assistance and assistance in getting residence and work permits. We also provide training on certain issues, such as health, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), labour rights in Spain, resume-writing skills, and interview skills, including how to dress for interviews and how to respond to questions about the gap in work experience due to the trafficking situation.

We have three shelter homes which are used depending on the circumstances of the woman, and the services above are provided in each according to the needs of the individual woman. Each shelter tends to have 4 or so women in it at a time, which enables staff to provide intensive individual attention and care.

1. The first shelter, which we call our emergency shelter, provides women with a safe space to rest and think. Women stay in the emergency shelter for one month on average. This is where she decides whether she wants to stay in Spain or return to her home country. If she wants to return to her home country, we contact the International Organization for Migration (IOM) which facilitates and funds the repatriation. Our collaboration with IOM is amazing. On a recent repatriation, IOM organised special protection for the affected woman. We took her to the airport, and then IOM provided a police escort from the airport in her home country to her home. She felt very safe given this protection.

2. Long-term shelter is the second stage of the process. The length of time this is provided depends on the woman - we do not pressure her in any way about how long she stays. Women tend to stay in this shelter for around 6 months. While she is in this shelter, she is assisted through the process of getting a residence permit, which is required in order to get a work permit. Once a person receives a residence permit, Proyecto Esperanza refers her to job agencies as part of the service that we provide.
3. When they are ready, women move into the independent apartments. Women sign an agreement (not legally binding) with Proyecto Esperanza to stay in the independent apartments for 6 months. During this time, they agree to undertake certain activities, such as save money, attend counselling, etc. If at the end of the six months, the woman feels she is ready, she leaves. If she does not feel ready to leave, a new six month agreement is signed. The independent apartments are monitored by social workers.

Many of the staff members providing assistance, including those who live in the shelters with the women and the social workers, are members of Adoratrices, the religious order that Proyecto Esperanza is tied to. Adoratrices was formed especially to work with and for marginalised groups.

Nerea's background is in Human Rights both from academic and practical perspectives, including working with victims of human rights violations from a psychosocial perspective. Nerea works within the Programme Unit of the GAATW International Secretariat, further developing the European and Latin American regions of alliance and working on the Access to Justice theme.

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What percentage of affected women gets residence and work permits in Spain?

The percentage of affected women who are able to get residence and work permits is low in Spain because the law is very complicated. A trafficked woman can get a residence permit which is initially valid for 12 months only if she denounces the trafficker and the trafficker is found to be part of an organised trafficking network. Most women who have been trafficked here do want to stay, but it is not always an easy process to remain legitimately.

Who does Proyecto Esperanza work with to assist trafficked persons?

We work with the Spanish government and other NGOs, because we do not want to duplicate the efforts of others if appropriate services are already available.

We have also signed agreements with private companies who are willing to employ trafficked women or provide them with training.

How do affected persons view the direct assistance you provide?

I think they view it very positively, though I cannot speak for them. What I can say is that every woman who has gone through the process with us stays in touch. We come together for events, send each other birthday cards, and generally stay in touch. I think this is also because both the Adoratrices members who work in the shelters and as social workers and the Proyecto Esperanza staff are all really committed to helping these women, and they can feel that and hence really trust us.



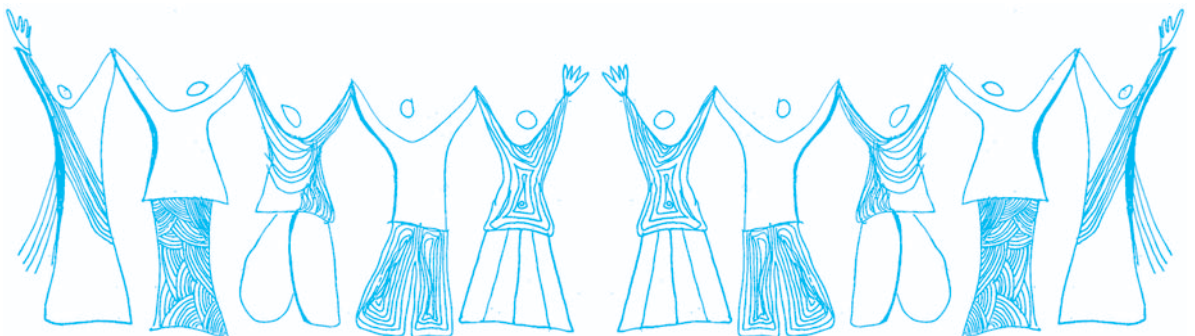
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Do affected persons view the direct assistance as empowering?

Yes, I think they do. When we speak to a woman, we do not give her an ideal picture in response to her difficult questions such as “Will I get a residence permit?” Instead, we say we will do our best, and always make sure we give her realistic information. In this way, we avoid having a paternalistic approach to providing assistance, and the woman feels empowered because she is able to make her own decisions based on impartial advice. We also always respect the decisions that the women make, and this is very empowering for them as well.

Do you view Proyecto Esperanza’s direct assistance as respecting the rights of women who have been trafficked?

Yes. I believe we respect, protect, and fight for the human rights of women who have been trafficked, and I would resign from Proyecto Esperanza the day this changed.



Cátia's Story

Interviewed by Gerardine Daniels

Translated by Frans Nederstigt



I was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1968 and have two children aged 16 and 19. I work as a domestic worker.

In 1997, I was invited by a fellow Brazilian woman to join a Brazilian team of dancers to present a show at a hotel in Lanzarote, a Spanish island popular with tourists. My cousin and I spent six months training with the team while waiting for our Spanish work permits and then departed for Spain in 1998. One month after we arrived, we were forced into prostitution following the dance shows, and our documents were taken. After three months, my cousin, two others and I decided to flee and denounce the Brazilian woman who had arranged the work for us and the owner of the hotel we worked in to the police. We broke down a door to get our official documents (passports, work contracts, permits, etc.) and then fled.

We went to the police and filed charges against the Brazilian woman and the hotel owner. The police then put us in touch with a NGO. When we arrived at the NGO, a female lawyer asked us what had happened. We explained the situation and said that we came from Brazil to Lanzarote to work as dancers



Cátia

at a hotel through a labour contract, but that a month after we had arrived, the hotel owner forced us into prostitution. We told the lawyer that what we wanted was to receive the money we earned for our work as dancers (we had not been paid) and that we didn't want to work as prostitutes. The lawyer took our documents and studied them and looked through our labour contracts. She informed us that under our contracts, we were only obligated to work as dancers, not as prostitutes.

The lawyer took our case, filed a complaint for us, and tried to arrange jobs for us since the hotel owner had not paid us, nor was willing to. I worked briefly as a maid, cleaning rooms in a

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Frans Nederstigt is the director of Projeto Trama, where he works fulltime as an international lawyer and is responsible for networking. Frans trained as a lawyer in The Netherlands, specializing in human rights, children's rights, international relations, immigration law and development. He has also undertaken a Master's in Political Development at the University of Manchester (United Kingdom) and is currently attending Brazilian law school at night with the aim of becoming a practicing lawyer in Brazil by the end of 2007.

hotel, and my cousin worked as a waitress. We also did some work in another bar when Carnival started, but all this had to be done without the hotel owner finding out. Our lawyer filed a labour lawsuit against the hotel owner. She told us that our working contracts stipulated that we had to continue working in the hotel and living in the hotel owner's house, and that we shouldn't break the contract for the remaining time (nine months). This was because in a labour case in Spain, it is important to work the entire contract to give standing and credit to your case and not be accused of breach of contract. In fact, the work that I got as a cleaner was only for a week, and then I didn't work for a long time since we had to continue working as dancers because we shouldn't break the contract. We received no assistance during this time, and had to survive on almost nothing. We were a little afraid to remain living in the hotel owner's home and working in his hotel, but we were under police protection and so he couldn't harm us at that time.

After staying in Spain for another nine months to work the remainder of our contracts, my cousin and I returned to Brazil. We were able to return to Brazil even though we had no money, because my cousin's mother knew about our situation and got in touch with the family of the Brazilian woman who had invited us to come and dance in Spain. She contacted the trafficker's family and told them that they had to provide tickets home for my cousin and I and that she would do whatever it took to make sure this happened. It took some time and

she had to go back a few times to get them to provide the tickets, but eventually they did pay for our tickets home.

When we arrived back in Brazil, there was nothing waiting for us. We came back and there was no compensation and no formal assistance waiting for us. My family and friends helped me a lot, though, and were very supportive, and we managed, through an aunt, to get in touch with a lawyer who had handled another trafficking case. She took the responsibility to assist my cousin and me legally, and she and the centre where she worked in Rio de Janeiro tried to help us as much as we needed at the beginning.

They advised us to file complaints against the female trafficker following threats she made to us. This was used in the subsequent court case to prove that ours was a trafficking case. The case got a lot of press in both Spain and Brazil.

The people at the centre went with us to make several statements but didn't actually provide legal representation. Our lawyer did not enter as an assistant of the public prosecutor, which is a very good way to monitor public cases and which provides the victim with a voice, nor propose launching a civil claim after the female trafficker went through her final appeal process.

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This has been my experience. I was surprised at a recent Consultation to find that I got very upset and emotional when giving my declaration, because quite a lot of time has passed since it happened. It has made me really want to talk with the psychologist at Projeto Trama, the NGO that I recently asked to look into my case since I have not been able to contact my previous lawyer. It has been a long time, yes, but it seems things were maybe caught up or held in that I have to let out. I didn't receive any assistance, aside from legal assistance, at any point in my experience, and yet I do feel the need for it.

The struggle isn't over yet. I had a friend from my neighbourhood in Brazil who went to Israel as a dancer around the time that I went to Lanzarote. She left a 2-year-old child behind. When she got there, she was forced into prostitution and locked up by the traffickers. She couldn't ask for help. She finally managed to get in touch with someone and ask them for help. The mafia discovered that she fled, and then the police and mafia found her and killed her. She didn't get help in Israel from an NGO and came back dead in a coffin. This made me even more determined to continue to fight for our rights. My friend's mother is left without any compensation and without any justice. It was a case that my cousin and I could not do anything to help with, and it really shocked us. That drives me to keep fighting for justice in my own case and for all others.

A lawyer from Spain explained that Cátia's case occurred eight years ago when Spain did not have anti-trafficking laws or methods for dealing with people who had been trafficked. Trafficking cases were not common, and no special attention was paid to them. This is why Cátia and her cousin's received such limited legal and other assistance.

While the situation has improved vastly in Spain, many countries still do not assist trafficked persons adequately. Yet it is clear to see from Cátia's experience, and from her story about her friend, that assistance is absolutely essential.

Gerardine is an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development (AYAD) currently on assignment with GAATW. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in Economics, Managerial Studies and Political Science, and post-graduate qualifications. Gerardine is a member of the Communications Unit of the GAATW International Secretariat, and is responsible for the publication of the Alliance News among other things.



My Story - From Nepal to India and Back

Interviewed by Gerardine Daniels

Translated by Shyamali Larsen



I was trafficked at the age of 11. My stepmother used to treat me very badly, so I was very unhappy at home. A man and his wife in the village told me that if I left the village and went to town, I could get domestic work there and have a good income. So they took me from the village to a town, which was also in Nepal, and kept me locked in a room. After a while they explained that domestic work was not very good work, particularly in Nepal, but if they took me to India then maybe I would get more money. Not knowing what I was getting into, I agreed.

The man, his family and I went by train to India, though I wasn't sure if I was going to India or somewhere else. Two days after our arrival, another woman came and said that I would have to start working. Even then I didn't understand what kind of work it was, but she explained to me that it was prostitution and I would have to sleep with clients. I was only 11 years old.

This was my life for four years. We could never tell the difference between night and day because there were always

clients coming. The only way we could tell that a year had passed was because of Diwali, the Festival of Lights which comes along once a year. Every time Diwali came around, I knew another year had passed.

After four years, we were rescued in a raid by the Indian government and stayed in a shelter for six months, because apparently the Nepal government did not agree to have us back. We had no papers to prove which country we belonged to, and no one wanted us. We were 'damaged goods' in the eyes of the society. Officials asked us what we wanted to do and we said we would like to go back home to Nepal and somehow survive, so eventually some agreements were reached between the two countries and we came back.

In Nepal, I lived in an NGO shelter for a few years, at first because I did not know the name of my village or the name of the district. Eventually, the NGO helped me find out the village I was from, but when I went there I found that my father and my stepmother had moved.

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Finally, I met my parents again but my father refused to accept me and refused to sign the papers for my citizenship¹. I explained to him and I pleaded with him and eventually he did help me, but no one at the district level believed him when he told them that I was his daughter because I had not been in the village for so long. But maybe they wanted a bribe which we obviously could not afford to pay.

In the end, the NGO staff took me to a district officer who after a lot of trouble helped and completed all the paperwork and I finally got my citizenship.

I continued to stay at the NGO shelter in Nepal. They offered me a place to live and tried to teach me a few skills, but I was not ready to learn them because I was very upset by the way life had treated me. I was very disillusioned and unhappy. Life was hell in India but my future looked bleak too. I didn't know what I should do with my life, so I did not leave my room much - all I did was cook for everyone, eat and sleep. I stayed like this for about three years. But there was a nurse at the shelter who was very, very good. She tried to explain to me

that my condition, my situation, was not as bad as I thought. She took me to a mental hospital and showed me mentally disturbed people, and to another place where there were disabled people, and told me to look at these people who were far worse off than I. She asked why I was behaving as I was, and told me to take my life in my hands and move on. While at the shelter home I also got a chance to go to Bangladesh to participate in a meeting on trafficking where I met many people working on this issue and also other women who had gone through similar experiences to me.

After I came back, I learnt that WOREC (an organisation working in several parts of Nepal on trafficking, migration and women's health) was organising a 10-day training session. They invited me as well as all the other women who had returned to Nepal to attend as participants. It was after the training that I understood about the problem of trafficking. Following the training my friends and I decided to come together and form a group, and that is how Shakti Samuha was formed.

I briefly went back to the village, but could not stay there because I felt that all eyes were on me and everyone was

Shyamali is a member of Australian Volunteers International, and is responsible for the administrative and financial functions of the International Secretariat's operations. Shyamali taught biology and math at the higher secondary level for many years in Australia, and has a Master of Arts degree in Social Anthropology from University of Melbourne.

¹ Nepali girls who have been trafficked do not have any proof of their nationality when they return to Nepal because they were trafficked earlier than the period they can get citizenship (in Nepal citizenship is provided only after 18 years of age). Women applying for a passport or other citizenship papers need the approval of male relatives such as their fathers or brothers. Shakti Samuha worked with other GAATW members (ATWAIN, WOREC) and got some of them to lend their names for the registration of their group. They also continue to struggle against the rule requiring women to get approval from male family members to get identification papers.

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looking down on me. My family seemed ashamed of me, and being poor they were more vulnerable to the comments of people around us. Somehow my story had been published in the local newspaper with many exaggerations. It was impossible to live there, and I also needed work. So I returned to Kathmandu but had no money and nowhere to go. I went and sat in a temple by myself. A friend of mine and her mother were passing by late at night, and when they met me and heard my story, they offered to share their room with me. After staying with them for a while, I got a job. It was a very low-paying job; it only paid me 1200 rupees per month of which I spent almost 800 rupees on transport alone. But still, I was sharing a room with other people and I was not alone.

In time, I contacted Shakti Samuha again and they invited me to come and work with them again. I rented a very small room nearby, and started doing small scale work with them. They liked me very much and eventually I heard about a three-year training course in another city in Nepal. The training was a life-changing experience for me because I learned how to talk, how to eat, how to behave with others and so on. I also gained the self confidence to live independently after the three years beautician training.

After my training, everyone was very impressed with my performance. I got

an offer to work with street children who take drugs because they said there was a need for a gentle person such as myself. I had started the work with them and we had a routine going, but then I also received an offer from Shakti Samuha to work in the newly set up hostel². I was very happy to get both offers. I felt that my work was well appreciated, but was confused and had trouble deciding which one to take. The people who offered me the first position gave me one week to make up my mind, but the others advised me to think of long term possibilities. I felt that Shakti Samuha is my life, I had worked so much with all my friends and they all have very similar histories to mine, and so I eventually returned to Kathmandu and started working at the hostel.

A Recipient Becomes a Provider

Shakti Samuha³ provides a range of assistance. We currently have four district centres and we do a lot of work on prevention. When a woman first comes to the hostel, we take her case history and then assess her needs to see what kinds of things she wants - counselling, medical support or anything like that. If she does need medical support, we refer her to a doctor or the hospital. We also have a discussion with the woman about the kinds of skills that she has and if there are other skills she needs to re-

² The hostel is a shelter for trafficked women who have returned to Nepal.

³ For more information on Shakti Samuha, please visit their website at: <http://www.shaktisamuha.org/>

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Shakti Kendra opening ceremony

establish herself. After giving her all the different options, we advise her to choose skills that have market value. Once she has made a decision, we refer her to an NGO or private organisation that can provide that kind of skills. If she is a little educated, that is useful. We do provide simple literacy skills, particularly for those who are completely illiterate.

Counselling is provided on a needs-basis. Sometimes very intensive counselling is required, but it is done in informal sessions, in informal conversations, because I like presenting myself as a friend. In this non-threatening situation, the woman can open up and discuss her problems with me. I also do follow-up visits to women who leave the shelter voluntarily and go and find work in other areas of Kathmandu.

I like to keep in touch with them for two reasons. One is to find out if they're all right. Two, I like

them to think they have a friend because our main problem was that we felt there was no one there to help us. So I would like to extend my friendship.

My life today... I am getting married, and I still want to take Shakti Samuha forward because Shakti Samuha is more than just my work. Many of my friends and I have been rejected by our families, but we have formed strong bonds with each other and have stood by each other. We are like family. I personally want to create a network of trafficked/returned women so that they can lead their lives freely and get support from each other because there continue to be problems in living normal lives. Even I have a problem at this stage. I have told my fiancé about my past, but he has not mentioned this to his parents. If they find out, they may ask him to leave me. So I think a network of trafficked persons providing support to each other would be very good.

My Story-Dominican Republic

*Interviewed by Nerea Bilbatua while in
the Dominican Republic for the Latin
American & Caribbean Consultation
Translated by Nerea Bilbatua*



In My Own Words, I Am...

I am an extraordinary woman. The mother of three wonderful children. I love life, I love animals. My favourite rose is the “flor del sol”. To me, butterflies represent freedom. This is what I am.

My Experience

I was trafficked to Spain a few years ago. It was a very sad experience. I was the first returnee to the Dominican Republic. At that time there were no networks, there was nothing.

I was very young when I was trafficked. My dream was to have a home, a nice family, but after you have been deceived you only have sorrows. But you have to stand up and continue walking. This is what I have always done. And this is what I continue to do.

In the brothel I was trafficked into there were other Dominican women.

Sometimes the owners of the brothels marry a Dominican so she can guard the others. The owner forced me to have sex with the men he selected. I could never choose.

It is not easy that somebody uses your body as he would use a car.

My Escape

By the time I escaped, I had been in Spain for one year and they already trusted me a bit. A client who was a sailor helped me to run away. I escaped as a stowaway on the ship where he worked. I couldn't take anything with me. Only he and another sailor knew that I was on board. I don't know how long the trip lasted. I could not say whether it was day or night. I was really afraid but I knew it was the only chance for me to escape.

My Return

When I arrived back in the Dominican Republic, I reported the trafficker. I even

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looked for him in the hotel where he had contacted me. I don't know if he went into hiding (these people have a lot of money), but he was never found. I feel that the only person who benefited from the entire experience was him. He took all that was supposed to be mine. I worked for a year and I never saw any money. I never knew what happened to the other women who were trafficked with me.

After I came back I was rejected by my family. I lost my children and I had to fight very hard to bring them back with me. You know, I was like a wolf defending her cubs.

After knowing that I had been a prostitute in Spain my family looked at me differently. I come from a poor family, but my family had always placed great value in the concept of *honrados*. In other words the sexual purity of women is of utmost importance to uphold the moral standard of the family. Now they consider me the family's black sheep.

Even though I have proved to them that I could overcome what happened... and I tell you, I am an extraordinary woman. Why am I extraordinary? Because I have put aside all my desires and ambitions as a woman to be a mother to my children. And I have fought, I have struggled, and I still do. And now I am a professional with skills.

Any person that kills or steals goes to jail, serves a sentence and gets released, but I will never complete my sentence in my family's eyes. Having a family that rejects me, that's my ongoing punishment.

Once someone told me "words go away with the wind" and I replied "yes, but the mark words leave in your soul stays forever". I don't care anymore what other people think about me. I only care about my children's opinion. I have three children. They are 20, 19 and 15 years old. A beautiful cat is my other treasure.

The Assistance I Received

When I arrived, I thought that if I had done it (being a sex worker) before I could also do it here and at least I would see the money I earned. I did not care about anything. I started working in a billiard hall (type of brothel) and after some months a health messenger¹ from COIN came. That was 12 years ago.

She told me about COIN and what they were doing and invited me to their meetings. I went to some of them with other women and little by little I got more interested in their work. They also started asking me about my case and my experiences. In the beginning I never spoke in their meetings. I was very afraid. But one day I decided to break the silence.

Nerea's background is in Human Rights both from academic and practical perspectives including working with victims of human rights violations from a psychosocial perspective. Nerea works within the Programme Unit of the GAATW International Secretariat further developing the European and Latin American regions of alliance and working on the Access to Justice theme.

¹ COIN uses the term 'health messenger' to refer to their peer facilitators.

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The injustices and mistreatment I suffered were what made me start talking. Also the help I received from COIN. I began to be more and more involved in their activities. This made me feel important. At the beginning I would only attend their trainings. Afterwards I became a trainer myself.

The most valuable part of the assistance I received was the truth (the honesty). COIN is not like other places where they promise a lot but you don't get anything. They don't make promises but you get everything.

I got medical, psychological, working skills, and other types of assistance. I could continue working in the billiard hall and afterwards come to COIN and work as a health messenger. At that time I was responsible for a women's group in one of the zones of Santo Domingo. When a new woman (sex worker) arrived, I would teach her how to use a condom etc. Then I became very interested in nursing and COIN helped me to study. They paid for my studies. They have been the facilitators of the process. I love what I'm doing. It's my life. And I still go to the brothels to provide check-ups for the women working there.

I only received assistance from COIN. At that time there were no programmes from the government. Now this has changed. Sex workers have gained respect. There are health programmes, they are invited to speak on TV... but this is the result of years of work from COIN and of the respect they have gained doing a quality job. Nothing was given for free.

The Impact of Assistance

Assistance helped me as a human being. It helped me as a woman. It helped me to empower myself, to gain control over my life, over my body. It helped me to realise that my body belongs to me, because at that time I felt that my body belonged to other people, not to me. When someone tells you that your body is yours this is very important because then it is up to you to decide how to use it. I felt that I was worthless but they taught me that I am very worthy. They taught me to accept myself as I am.

I also learnt that violence is not only physical. I was very violent at that time, especially when I thought about all the people that had caused me harm.

I decided to quit the billiard hall because I felt that I was able to do much more.

I could find myself.

I now work in COIN's health area. I am the nurse in charge of the vaccines area and I also help the doctors working here. I am the nurse of COIN but also of the neighbourhood. Today, tomorrow and forever.

If I have to define the assistance I received from COIN I would say at first it felt like I was on a bed of needles, because yes, the process of healing can also be painful. But now I feel like a sunflower.

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COIN's Health Area

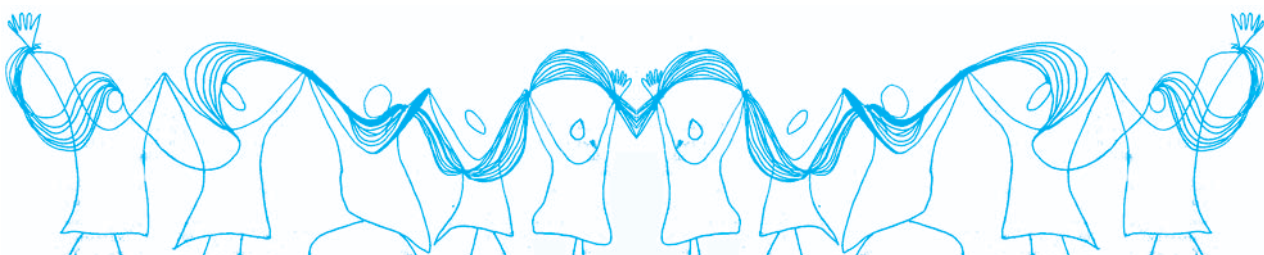
On Empowerment

Empowerment means gaining control over what is mine, my body, my sexuality. It means knowing that I can decide how many children I want and whom I want to have sex with. It is to know that I can tell my partner where I like to be touched or not, but above all it means that I can respect myself, and this is the most valuable thing of all.

You know, the process I've been going through, of first receiving assistance and afterwards providing assistance, is like what a butterfly would experience if it has been trapped in your hands--you open your hands, the butterfly starts fluttering her wings, slowly and tentatively in

disbelief. And then a moment comes when the butterfly takes to her wings again. The world is hers, once again! That is how it has been for me.

Can you imagine the moment when my children will graduate from university (two of them are at the university now), and I will be there? I can't imagine that moment! It will be the biggest thing in the world for me.



My Story - From Thailand to Switzerland

*Interviewed by Jiraporn Saetang via
email and telephone*

Translated by Jiraporn Saetang



I am 32 years old, and come from the Mahasaakham Province of Thailand. My father is a farmer, and I have an older brother who married and moved to another town with his family. I am the only daughter, and am fully responsible for my parents. I migrated to Bangkok for work when I was quite young and sent money back home regularly to support my parents.

I decided to migrate to Switzerland because I had to pay off the debts of my parents and my ex-husband. I had married a Thai man and we had a daughter, but after her birth my husband became very irresponsible, drinking and gambling every day. I divorced him when my daughter was very young and he has not given me any financial support since. Instead, I have had to pay back all the debts he accrued when we were together.

At the time, I worked as a cashier in a big company in Bangkok. Then, one of my friends who had migrated abroad introduced me to an agent. The agent

took my photo and sent it to a job agency in Switzerland, and later arranged a 3-month tourist visa for me and sent me to a massage parlour in Switzerland. She told me that the women working in the parlour have the option of doing massages only, and guaranteed that I would earn about 80,000-100,000 baht (approximately US\$2,095-2,615) per month.

In Switzerland I quickly realized that all the information I got from the agent was false. I was forced to provide sex and that was the only service the clients came for. No one came for a Thai massage only as I was told.

At first, I told myself to tolerate it and save some money for my family. I was under their control; I was not allowed to call home or to go out. For most of the time, I was confined in the bedroom. The agent always insulted and threatened me when I refused clients. They later confiscated my travel documents, and said they would not send me back to Bangkok until I paid off the amount that they paid the agent in Bangkok.

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After I had been in the massage parlour for one month, I decided to escape with another Thai woman who was lured to the same massage parlour. We ran to the main road and met a woman who later brought us to stay with her friend. While I was there, I also contacted one of my clients from the parlour who had been willing to help me.

A week later, the friend contacted FIZ, an NGO in Switzerland, to provide assistance to us. I was very happy to meet the FIZ staff member who was originally from Thailand. I could communicate easily with her and she also helped me to call my family in Thailand. We were accommodated in the FIZ safe house for two months. FIZ also helped us to do fundraising activities such as selling Thai food to try to raise sufficient funds to pay for our return airfares and some of our debt to the agent. Although our fundraising did not raise enough money to cover all financial needs, I was really impressed by the concept. I was being given an opportunity to do something to help myself.

I appreciate the assistance and support which I got from FIZ and I think that other women who got support from them would also agree with me. As a trafficked woman, I was able to choose whether I wanted to return home immediately or stay for a while as my visa had not yet expired. I did not feel that they were only interested to send me back home as quickly as possible.

I think the programme of FIZ would improve if they take on some more Thai

staff. In the town where I was, there is only one Thai staff so when a woman had problems or needed help, she had to make an appointment with the Thai staff one week in advance. This system might not meet the needs of women who are in a really serious situation.

When I returned to Thailand, I went to my home town and stayed with my family for a few months. I had left home with big dreams and high hopes and now I was back as a failure. My family shared my disappointment but they were supportive and understanding. We stood together as a family and somehow found strength to face the community. It is not easy to stand the rude comments of the community which derides those who do not succeed. After a few months I came back to Bangkok to look for a job.

FIZ had made contact with GAATW Secretariat and had advised me to meet them. I was not sure if I should do that. I did not know GAATW's work. I did not know anyone who knew them. I was apprehensive. I feared that they might be inquisitive and ask me too many questions to probe into my past. I worried that they would judge me. While still in Switzerland I had met someone from Italy and I was planning to marry him. I was not sure how a NGO like GAATW would react to such plans of mine. Would they advise me against it? I needed some financial help and support to complete

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my training in Thai massage and yoga. But I did not want to accept conditional help from anyone.

I was pleasantly surprised by GAATW staff. They were respectful, discreet and caring. GAATW does not have an assistance programme and because I did not need any emergency assistance nor was thinking of pressing charges in court, we decided not to approach any other NGO. Staff of GAATW treated me like a sister and helped me as they would do for a friend or sister. I stayed with one of their staff until I completed my intensive training in yoga and massage. I met many people in their office when I had time. Their attitude made me feel like a normal, confident person once again.

Simultaneously I was looking for a job and eventually the company that I had worked in before took me back. I stayed in touch with FIZ, GAATW and many other people who had stood by me in my difficult time. It took much longer for my marriage plans to materialize and after nearly 2 years I returned to Switzerland.

I live in Switzerland now. My husband is a good man, an Italian computer professional who lives in Switzerland. We have a little daughter. We often visit my husband's family in Italy. I am learning new languages and adapting to

my new life fast. I work as a Thai traditional masseur and also teach yoga. I like my work.

Should I end my story here by saying that I am happy in my new life? But real life stories do not end with just a happy ending. As long as one lives, happiness and sorrows, dreams and disappointments will always be mixed. I am able to send some money back home every month, but our earnings are insufficient for me to visit my family in Thailand. My daughter from the previous relationship still lives with my parents in the northeast of Thailand. I long for the day when she can join me. I don't know when that day will arrive. I miss her a lot. What does she think about her mother who is far away? Does she think about me at all?

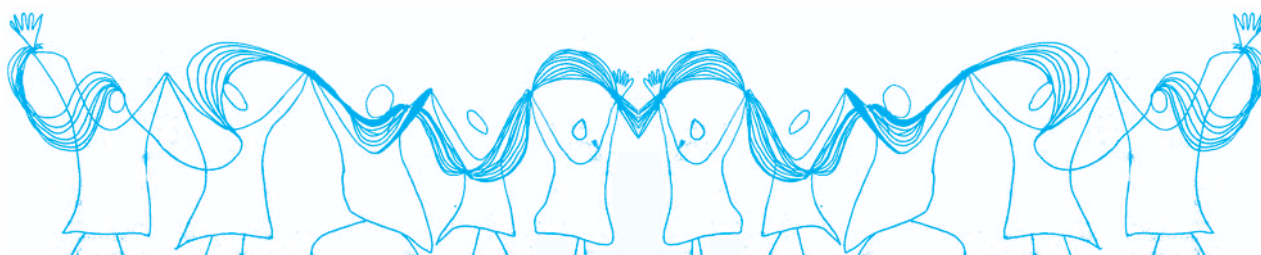
But that is not all. Recently, someone who I thought of as a friend did something which affected me deeply and made me think of the so-called assistance programmes for trafficked women. Someone who had helped me in the past recently decided to share my story publicly without respecting my need for privacy. May be she was trying to raise awareness of people but why did she not think of my life? Will people respect me if they know of my past? I don't think so. Most people are prejudiced. I am also worried about my security. If the brothel owner knows my whereabouts she may not leave me in peace.

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I have a word of advice to people who provide assistance to trafficked women. The success of a programme could be measured by how many women have been helped to get back to ordinary, everyday life. And for some of us it may take very long to get back to an ordinary life. Programme givers may think that our fears are unfounded but they are real. We do need someone to talk to about our feelings and our problems. Someone who understands our problems and who is non-judgmental about our past. But please do not rush to publicize our lives without consulting us.

To the women like me, I would like to say that it is extremely important for us to be strong. With our families and with society. We need to be realistic in your plans and trust that we can create our own future, we can change our own lives. No one, no programme, no organisation can stand by us forever. We need to learn new skills and trust that things will change.

A final thought. Although my writing skills are limited, each of my words is imbued with my feelings and my experiences, and I do hope that my story can be of some use for others, both those who have had similar experiences and those who offer assistance to such people.



Sandiya thi pan Women's Centre - Providing Assistance to the Community

Translated by Jiraporn Saetang



The Sandiya thi pan Women's Centre in Mae Sot, Thailand, is run by Burmese migrant women who are representative of their community. They have experienced the same problems as other women in the community, and hence the women trust them because they understand their problems and can give practical advice and workable solutions.

The Women's Centre runs a drop-in centre, provides health care and treatments (herbal remedies), offers counselling sessions, gives women a safe

space, and runs an outreach programme offering mobile health care which reaches out to communities and workplaces such as brothels. The Women's Centre also provides direct assistance to women who have been abused or suffer serious health problems, and produces and disseminates information on women's health, migration and the work situation in Mae Sot.

The women who work in the Centre have all received some type of social assistance in the past. These are their thoughts on how their current position of assistance provider has impacted their lives.



◆INTERVIEWS◆



Everyone including us also has this story, so they feel comfortable talking to us. I can help women who come from the same place and background as me. I can exercise my knowledge - both what I knew before and what I've learned - to help others. I hope that one day I can go back home when it is safe and good to return and use these skills.

Working at the Women's Centre has changed my attitude toward women's problems, especially on the issue of sex workers. In the past, when I was in Burma, sex workers were badly discriminated against and I believed that was right. But since I've come here, I see this is just one pattern of life and I accept it.

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The Women's Centre is working to make women understand more, and we start with our families. I talk to my mother about our activities and issues like gender - she never understood these things before, and how strong the link is between gender, society and the way we are treated. Providing assistance means we teach women how to understand their problems holistically and how to fight for themselves.

Providing assistance has meant that I get more respect from the community, and I feel more confident. Other than that, I observe that when I have more respect from the community, my husband is more careful with me. Before, he was very bad, shouting and yelling at me anytime, anywhere. Since I've become a peer facilitator, however, he wouldn't dare to do that in front of everyone.



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Since working at the Women's Centre, I am more accepted in my community. The knowledge I have been given has helped me to improve my skills as a traditional birth attendant, and these improved skills mean women respect me more when I assist them.

I also view my life differently. When things happened to me before, I just thought it was my life and accepted everything. After coming to the Centre and becoming a peer facilitator, I question more and don't just accept that this is my life without questioning 'why'. I feel more a part of the community because I feel I am making a contribution. Respect from the community is also an important result of working in the Centre. What I have gotten from this experience is a lot more than I expected.



I can do something for the people who share the same experiences that I do and I can fulfil something that is missing in my life.

What has changed since the Women's Centre opened is my belief in myself. Before, I never imagined that I could stand and do things at this kind of level for myself and others, and have confidence in my life.

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