

Beyond Rescue

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This is the second installment of a two-part series. The first part, "The Crusade Against Sex Trafficking," was published in the October 5 issue. --The Editors

Drifting down Junquera Street after nightfall with your car doors unlocked is an unwise proposition. Pimps dart out from street corners and pound on the windows of passing cars--sometimes they are so eager to provide the services of their "girls" that they pry open car doors to make a more direct appeal. Visitors who make it out of the car unscathed face another gantlet at the main entrance of Kamagayan, one of the main red-light districts in Cebu City, the Philippines. Descend past the jostling throng and the howling of the karaoke bars, and the pathway wends toward brothels and alleyways strung with dim red lights, where customers come to find the underage prostitutes that Kamagayan is notorious for providing--along with drugs and gambling opportunities. Out of plain sight, in an alleyway, is a cluster of girls with puppyish, knobby knees. Their garish makeup stands out like neon on their young faces, adding to Kamagayan's air of desperate pageantry.



Like Cambodia and Thailand, the Philippines suffers from a significant problem with child sex exploitation. But the Philippines provides more fertile ground for US work on anti-trafficking--the majority-Catholic country is more in ideological harmony with the abolitionist attitudes that hold sway in Washington. As Jean Enriquez, executive director of the Coalition Against the Trafficking in Women-Asia Pacific, asserted, "All prostitution is forced rape"--an idea that has great ideological and political resonance in the Philippines. Enriquez's group is one of the main anti-trafficking

organizers in the Philippines and a beneficiary of US government funds on the issue; the organization also helped draft the Philippines' anti-trafficking legislation.

In the Philippines the International Justice Mission found a hospitable home for its work. IJM draws on the services of evangelical lawyers, law-enforcement officers and social workers, who enlist local counterparts and police to combat human rights abuses in the developing world. In the Philippines, as in India, Cambodia and, in the past, Thailand, IJM conducts "brothel raids"--its most controversial and best-known work--by providing evidence of trafficking to local police, collaborating on "interventions" to remove victims from the establishments and working to ensure the arrest and prosecution of their abusers.

For IJM, the lack of highly vocal sex-worker organizations or HIV NGOs--the traditional critics of IJM's work--has meant a smoother reception for the group's work in the Philippines. The organization has also been able to avoid the considerable friction that has resulted in other countries from the deportation of women netted in raids--most of the trafficking that occurs within the Philippines concerns domestic movement. And the organization has found willing government partners and a network of shelters run by Christian organizations. One aftercare shelter in partnership with IJM, Happy Horizons, offers "daily, Bible-based counseling to restore the self-esteem and confidence that comes with the realization that one is a precious, beloved child of God.... When the restoration process is completed, children rescued from the sex trade in Cebu City will be able to lead happy, productive Christian lives."

IJM has had some notable successes in the Philippines--where it has a presence in Manila, Cebu and its new State Department-funded office in Samar--particularly in the realm of prosecutions. One case involved a shyly smiling young woman who identified herself as Cris, in tribute to the social worker who had counseled her. Cris and her friends were deceived by one of the friends' relatives. Promised jobs as waitresses, they had traveled with her to Batangas, where they were apprehended en route by police trained by the Visayan Forum, an organization that works on domestic labor abuses and trafficking prevention. IJM won the case against Cris's trafficker in 2008.

IJM's office in Cebu expanded upon the organization's previous work--perhaps partially because of input from its influential funder. Supported by a \$5 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Project Lantern, based in the Cebu office, was designed to create a replicable model of countertrafficking work. An additional benefit, IJM claimed, would be a reduction in HIV infection rates--rescue would remove trafficking victims from potential infection, and successful prosecution of traffickers would reduce overall numbers of potential victims. But questions abound about the counter-trafficking approach embodied by Project Lantern and whether it is, in fact, a model that ought to be replicated.

According to the grantmaker who signed off on the Gates funding, Project Lantern was an attempt to create harmony between IJM's criminal-justice approach and one that was more centered on community development and women's empowerment. "We weren't necessarily encouraging [IJM] to do anything but what their model does," says Helene Gayle, former director of the Gates HIV, TB and Reproductive Health program and current president/CEO of Care USA. "But we wanted to see...is there a way of pulling them into the family?"

In Project Lantern, IJM has refined its techniques, but problems with police corruption and

insufficient economic alternatives to prostitution persist--problems that illustrate the ways that IJM's model may be insufficient to overcome systemic issues, including spotty "aftercare" infrastructure. IJM's raids overwhelmed the shelter and social-services capacity of Cebu, for example. In addition, a number of the women and girls who could be housed at the government centers would stage risky escapes, illustrating the failure of post-raid services to ameliorate immediate economic and familial pressures and address the ways rescue could feel like a form of detention, according to human rights critics. Less drastic and more family-focused interventions, critics argued, would be a more effective way to help minors out of the commercial sex industry.

For Project Lantern, IJM made a number of notable improvements, conducting the organization's first official baseline study to assess pre-existing levels of trafficking. It has also been working to integrate trafficking victims' families and economic needs into aftercare. The organization reached out to social-service groups like the Cebu City Health Department, which conducts HIV-screening for sex workers, and even set up a meeting with an association of brothel owners in order to explain the anti-trafficking law to them. And it also seems to be conducting more tightly focused stings--in which pimps or traffickers bring minors to hotel rooms or other off-site locations--rather than conducting large, wholesale raids.

"It's good to hear about these improvements," said Françoise Girard, director of the Open Society Institute's Public Health Program. Girard had met with IJM's president, Gary Haugen, in 2007 to discuss her concerns about the group's counter-trafficking work. "But really, shouldn't they have been doing all these things before? They didn't have baseline information [about] whether their actions had any effect on numbers of trafficked women after doing this work for all these years?"

"There's real tension in their model," she continued. "Are we here to rescue individual girls, or test the theory about how the criminal justice system could create a disincentive for trafficking? When I pressed them about which to choose, they went with individual girls. There's always a reason to raid in that case--and we know what kinds of problems with deportation, detention and brutality the raids can bring."

IJM has also struggled with state corruption, including bribes, extortion and sexual coercion or complicity on the part of the police. The group won a landmark case this past September against a police officer for trafficking minors into the sex industry--the first conviction of a public officer for this crime in the Philippines. But the problems remain deeply entrenched. In 2006, before the advent of Project Lantern, the Cebu City government passed an ordinance that police were not allowed to have sexual intercourse with suspected trafficking victims when performing stings. "That was very bad," said police inspector Enrique Lacerna. "One police officer was caught on CCTV during a raid. Yes, having sex with the trafficking victim during the sting."

Despite the ordinance, another policeman confirmed that law enforcement agents still insisted on the performance of sexual services when conducting anti-trafficking raids. Nervous sweat beading his brow, he also asserted that a number of men in his unit received 10,000 pesos per month for protecting brothels and tipping off owners in the case of an impending raid. Considering that the starting monthly salary of a police officer was 9,500 pesos, it was no small haul. Fearing reprisals from other police officers, he spoke on condition of anonymity, as did a government official who indicated that "there is a concern among partners in the region about the involvement of police in trafficking, and a concern that they may use the anti-trafficking campaign to exert pressure on

brothel owners for their personal benefit." The official declined to speak about specific incidents.

As in Cambodia and Thailand, some IJM rescuees did not want to stay rescued. At IJM's site in Cebu, young women and girls removed an air conditioner and jumped from the second floor of HerSpace, a processing center that IJM built, some incurring injuries. Others walked out of another center, which was undergoing construction to increase security. And still another group attempted to burn down a facility--luckily, no one was injured.

In the Philippines, I made numerous attempts to find and speak with "the one" rescued in an IJM intervention, as I had in Thailand and in Cambodia. The closest I came in any of the countries was a 19-year-old woman who had returned to prostitution after being caught in a 2008 IJM-initiated raid and escaping from Cebu's Department of Social Welfare and Development processing center. But, traumatized by the raid-and-rescue experience, she refused to speak to me in person, and only asked if I was from an NGO like IJM.

"She says she will never talk to anyone from an NGO ever again," my translator relayed, "if that is what they do."

The director of Cebu's Department of Social Welfare and Development, Teodulo Romo, admits, "We were not ready when we stepped up the rescue operations.... Aftercare was the weakest link." Hence, the escapes. HerSpace, he noted, is "surrounded by a high fence and barbed wire to prevent people from the outside coming in." After the air conditioner escape, "We had to reinforce the perimeter, and so far there have been no more escapes since that happened in May." IJM helped to improve security at another facility, called The Haven, as well, by building higher walls and fences--ostensibly meant to protect the women and girls but perhaps even more effective at making sure they couldn't leave the shelters.

One NGO, called Bidlisiw, takes a drastically different approach to its counter-trafficking work. Huddled in the shadow of a bridge overpass, the Bidlisiw building houses a classroom with a green chalkboard and rough chairs, and a staff office with wooden desks crowded in rows, as in a schoolhouse. The floor of the office runs down at a slant, with the effect of making one feel a bit drunk when traversing the room. Bidlisiw was once funded by USAID but saw its funding dry up when that organization began to shift from its safer-sex approach to a more abstinence-based policy in 2002 and 2003. European funders then stepped in to support the organization's work.

Over the course of twenty years Bidlisiw has developed a rigorously holistic program for children in the commercial sex industry. It reaches out on all fronts--offering the families and children comprehensive psychosocial counseling, livelihood initiatives, microloans and tutoring and vocational training. It also educates clients on the anti-trafficking law and HIV prevention.

Last year 140 families graduated from the program--preliminary indicators show that 30 percent of the children have left prostitution. "That's a lot for us. If we can't stop them, at least they can help themselves a little bit more with our support," says executive director Lolita Ganapin.

Under Philippine law, every one of Bidlisiw's clients would be considered a trafficking victim--all of them are underage children in the sex industry. Ganapin finds an organization like IJM useful for the most extreme cases--"when we know the child is in clear bondage or is being abused or severely

taken advantage of by pimps"--and has also discreetly reported such cases to the police. However, she doesn't advocate for wholesale rescue operations to remove the majority of her organization's clients from the sex industry. Cebu province doesn't have adequate facilities for all of them, she said, and "after [the children are] released, they will go back. It's better...to proceed to a more planned-out intervention that has a longer impact."

A few women involved in Bidlisiw outreach programs filter through the office--20-year-old Maricel, stout, smiling, in a red shirt; Ronalin, 24, who speaks excellent English and worked for the organization as a peer educator; and Grace. Immensely pregnant, Grace has huge sloe eyes and a downturned mouth--she is snacking on a stick of grilled meat and slurping from a glass Pepsi bottle. Grace and Ronalin both started working the bars when they were teenagers--Ronalin was deceived by a friend; Grace was not. Maricel, however, claims she just started sex work two months ago, when her mother suggested she work the streets so they'd have enough money for rice. Her military boyfriend is her "manager" and that of Grace as well, who works in a friend's house along with five other girls.

As we continue talking, however, some of the stories begin to unravel. At first Maricel says she was caught in a police sweep just this year, as was Grace, who was then released because she was pregnant. Have they been caught in raids before? Maricel shakes her head vaguely. Grace snorts and says, "Stop lying! She was captured in a raid much earlier--when she was 12. She was lying to you before, you know. She's one of the runaways who escaped from a shelter."

Maricel speaks with her gaze in her lap. "It's true. I didn't want you to think badly of me. I've been working the streets a long time. But I'm good, you know. I always use condoms."

Another snort. "Liar! You don't. I know you want to get pregnant," says Grace. "You don't even go for the health checkups at the government clinic."

A hullabaloo breaks out. After five or so minutes of frantic gesticulating and rapid-fire Cebuano, Maricel has promised to talk over her decision to abandon condoms with a Bidlisiw staff member, who will also accompany her to the clinic the following Monday. Grace looks sideways at Maricel, gesturing with her now picked-clean kebab stick, and says, "Take a good bath before, because otherwise the nurse will get really mad and stick a ladle in you instead of a speculum." The group screeches in laughter. According to the Bidlisiw staff, Grace has a strong, salutary effect on the younger girls, pushing them to take care of their health, trying to encourage them to go back to school--so much so that the organization's leaders were eyeing her as a future peer educator. "But then, there's the baby," says Bidlisiw staff member Pam. "So who knows if she would have the time. But they really listen to her."

Maricel refuses to reply. She stands up, brushes off the top of her pants and announces she is going home to shower before going out to meet customers.

The Bidlisiw staff have a tour in mind. We head out to a clutch of red-lighted bars, karaoke clubs, a host club full of grinning, pirouetting men who cater to foreign tourists--women and men--and "carton city," a weed-ravaged field where women used to provide sexual services on flattened cardboard boxes before a police raid earlier that year.

Our final stop is the town square, where many of the city's underage prostitutes are waiting for customers. An oddly named Orange Brutus lords over one corner of the square--evidently Orange Julius had been shanked long ago--along with an immense church, a raggedy park and an amphitheater. No less imposing is Grace, who is presiding over the scene.

Pam introduces me to a young girl Bidlisiw is trying to reach out to--M, a 16-year-old with hair so thick and curly that it seems like it has drawn all the vigor from her too-slight shoulders. Perhaps five feet tall, M is dressed in an ashy-pink one-piece, her small feet slipped into rubber flip-flops, her dark eyes alternately careless and curious. She started working the streets when she was 15. "My boyfriend took my virginity, and then left me," says M. Her voice is unexpectedly deep, a husky alto. "So what else was I good for after that? Anyway, boyfriends don't pay." She drags on her cigarette and then flings it into the street.

M has six siblings--most of them live with her mother and father, but she, as the oldest, lives with her grandmother. She went to school for a while, and liked it, before money got too tight and she had to quit. Working the streets isn't so bad, she says--she has her friends, the 'manager' who finds customers for her and another girl, and the small room they rent together for encounters with clients. She spends her days in the streets or the square, which she prefers--the open-air restaurant down the road has a jukebox, and she can listen to music. "I'll play my favorite song for you," she says, taking a few pesos from Pam. She runs over to the restaurant and returns to explain the lyrics of the song, "Sana." "It's about love, how you lose it but have to keep enduring." Her eyes turn toward a small boy who is frog-hopping near her, jumping but careful to keep a purple ice-cream cone from falling to the pavement. "My brother," she says. "I can actually pay for him to go to school--he's in first grade now, and if we keep it up, maybe he can actually finish..." Her eyes shine with pride, and she smiles down at him.

The look on M's face strikes me as familiar. It mirrors the IJM staff's faces when they speak of the symbolic culmination of their work: looking into the face of a rescuee, "that 15-year-old girl," whom M had been when she started working the streets. While the rescuers would never claim to impart a godly gaze, the moment of looking into that rescued girl's face seemed to reflect their own relationships with the divine--the desire to see and be seen in the light of goodness, healed and saved in the loving gaze of their creator. Each rescue was the proof of the goodness of God; each rescue described as the turning point in a life of possible redemption. The moment was a transcendent one--one that redeemed the law from being a tool in the hands of clumsy, imperfect humans and made it one that flowed out of divine authority, a moment that enabled the rescuers to feel as though they could save a girl from being an empty vessel or a dismembered body and restore her essential dignity as a child made in the image of God.

But the look on M's face also reflects the intensity of conviction with which IJM staff have spoken of their work. Her mission is to care for her brother, just as their mission is to try to save her from doing so by making a grievous choice no child could consent to under international law. They would try to offer her the safety and stability of a shelter, but it did not seem likely that she would accept rescue should it jeopardize the welfare of her family, or that she would settle for being a witness to the rescuers' good deed, or a witness in a case. The stories both the rescuers and their would-be rescuee tell about their respective roles in alleviating suffering are powerful and difficult to relinquish. M was the closest person to "the one" I would find, but her face held a tale her

rescuers would be hard-pressed to unravel--the ways she'd struggled to find meaning in her own life, and sacrificed herself to become a rescuer in her own right.

About Noy Thrupkaew

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