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Jessica Taylor
jess.aitien99@gmail.com

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THE FINE LINE OF DETERMINATION:
SUPPORTING THE AGENCY OF FILIPINA SEX TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS

Jessica Taylor
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Professor Brian Komei Dempster
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Abstract

This paper examines the economic, geographic and cultural factors that perpetuate sex trafficking in the Philippines along with the impact of the dominant victim narrative on affected Philippine women. Along with analyzing this complex problem, the research evaluates and critiques current trends of policy support and law in the Philippines, and their level of efficacy in resolving the issue of sex trafficking and promoting agency and survivorship for the women involved. Current solutions and support from both legal and non-governmental organizations' (NGO) are, to a large extent, rendered ineffective due to a simplified narrative of loss and victimization that is perpetuated by policymakers. With this stigma placed on Philippine survivors of sex trafficking, both domestic and overseas workers, this research strives to answer the question: How can Philippine policy engagement promote sex trafficking survivor agency that moves beyond an established victim narrative? This research outlines the process and problems of trafficking that trap Filipinas in a vicious cycle, the laws initially meant to protect trafficking victims, and the current methods NGOs have implemented to support victims. This paper seeks to reveal the success of current models, and what needs to be improved upon, not just for the betterment of current survivors, but for all those who will be impacted in the future.

Keywords: *human trafficking, sex trafficking, Philippines, victim narrative, survivor agency*

Introduction

In pursuit of advocacy and support, it is oftentimes easy for policymakers to dilute a narrative into something simple and digestible for public consumption. This is all too true for the subject of human trafficking, and its prominent subset of sex trafficking. The narrative of human trafficking is not just complicated but potentially controversial. The standard story is reduced to one full of victims without agency, and it garners advocacy and support. The following research paper examines the economic, geographic, and cultural factors that perpetuate sex trafficking in the Philippines along with the impact of the dominant victim narrative on the affected Philippine women. Along with analyzing this complex problem, the research evaluates the strengths and limitations of current Philippine policies designed to assist and protect the socio-economically vulnerable population of young Philippine women (hereafter known as Filipinas or Pinay). Specifically, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: What is currently being done in the Philippines to address sex trafficking survivorship, and how can engagement by Philippine organizations promote survivorship and agency of sex trafficking victims that go beyond an established victim narrative? In pursuit of recovery and healing, a woman's perception of herself as more than just a victim is imperative. This requires room for autonomy and more finely tuned solutions. In sum, this research evaluates the complexities and nuances of Philippine cultural, political, and societal dynamics regarding gender and human trafficking, current laws in the country pertaining to the issue human, and the support of non-governmental organizations (hereafter known as NGOs) that offer the dual-edged support that both helps survivors yet frames them as victims.

The Philippine Context

To understand the modern problem of human trafficking in the Philippines, we must turn to significant historical context. Located in Southeast Asia, the Republic of the Philippines is a dynamic archipelago nation of about 100.9 million people spread across three main sections—Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. A developing country, the republic has a history of subjugation since the mid-1600s, being first colonized by the Spanish in 1521 and then again by the United States in 1898 after the initial rebellion by leaders, Jose Rizal and Emilio Aguinaldo who sought the country's independence.¹

However, its history as a colony has since established the country into what it is today—a diverse republic with a dominant Catholic faith, whose leaders aspire to never be dominated by another country, and to reign in the chaos of its own. Its current leader, Rodrigo Duterte, elected in 2016, ran on a platform of reform, to clean up the byproducts associated with one of the Philippine's most prevalent problems, poverty.² Focused specifically on the problem of drugs within the country, the Philippine president and his branches of government have since used resources to aggressively focus on the use of anti-drug sweeps in cities with controversial results in terms of the brutality used and the human rights issues raised.

In this current climate, the concerns of poverty and its other issues have since fallen to the wayside. For despite its incremental growth of about 6% in annual growth, and despite having outpaced its neighboring countries in said growth, the country suffers still from the

1 United Nations Development Programme, "About the Philippines," *United Nations Development Programme*, 2019,

<http://www.ph.undp.org/content/philippines/en/home/countryinfo.html>.

2 Human Rights Watch, "Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's 'War on Drugs,'" *Human Rights Watch*, September 9th, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/07/philippine-president-rodrigo-dutertes-war-drugs>. The byproduct noted specifically refers to drugs, however full detail lies beyond the scope of the paper.

effects of poverty, including the inequality of its population. In 2013, the country scored a .418 on the Gender Inequality Index, noting that despite the 49.7% of women involved in the labor market, at least 10 million women fall below the poverty line.³ With this population, the Philippines, and specifically, its women face the challenges not only of poverty, but the pressures to escape it and its consequences.

Poverty Cycles into Sex Trafficking

While the Philippine economy has seen growth throughout the years, wealth is stratified at the top with little distribution to the greater poor of the country. With only incremental progress towards its reduction, socio-economic poverty remains the key risk factor for human trafficking, especially among women.⁴ The aggravation of this troubling trend has been a point of study for scholars and developmental organizations alike. In recent years, The World Bank⁵ and the Asia Development Bank,⁶ especially, have outlined the continuing one-fifth of the population that continues to live around the poverty line, on less than 2 USD per day, with the majority of this population originating from rural and agrarian backgrounds with few localized options for better income.

Whereas the Philippines' urbanized hubs receive the most economic growth and opportunity, the same success is not seen in the rural and agricultural areas of the country, whose

3 United Nations Development Programme, Ibid.

4 Laura Cordisco Tsai, "Family Financial Roles Assumed by Sex Trafficking Survivors upon Community Re-Entry: Findings from a Financial Diaries Study in the Philippines," in *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 27 no. 4 (2017): 334.

5 Mara K. Warwick, Carolina Sanchez, Salman Zaidi, and Gabriel Demombyness, *Making growth work for the poor: a poverty assessment for the Philippines (English)* (Washington, D.C., World Bank Group 2018).

6 Asian Development Bank, "Poverty in the Philippines," 2018, [//www.adb.org/countries/Philippines/poverty](http://www.adb.org/countries/Philippines/poverty).

population continue to live with the challenges of poverty and experience its widespread impact. In its 2018 report, analysts of the World Bank reported that of the 101.6 million population, the 76.4 million live in either rural or agrarian households, with 26.2 million of this population living in poverty; 34.2% live in poverty.⁷ This assessment is most likely due to the reliance on the surrounding environment. Households rely on the agrarian means, such as farming and gathering to accumulate wealth. With climate change and the more progressively violent hurricanes and floods, these resources cannot be counted on. Gathered accounts from the Quezon Coastal Province attest to the need to change for survival. Since the 2004 flood caused by typhoon “Winnie,” the river that many live off of has shifted, and farmers who have relied on its resources for so long must adapt. Instead of cultivating rice fields and coconut groves, many have since diversified their crops when able, growing watermelons and vegetables, and gathering non-farming resources such as charcoal to diversify their incomes.⁸ Even this proves unreliable, however with the natural environment yielding less and less predictability the more climate changes.

Starvation and evacuation is always around the corner, making any success only a mild one, with euphoria temporary and susceptible to fall away with any shock of sudden change. As such, “each household and its family members face a high probability of poverty although the household may not be permanently poor all the time.”⁹ The story of poverty therefore is oftentimes not linear but should be instead seen as a part of a larger, cyclical narrative. Where

⁷ Warwick, *Making growth work for the poor*, 40.

⁸ Bernadette P. Resurrección and Edsel E. Sajor, “Gender, Floods and Mobile Subjects: a Post-Disaster View” in *Gendered Entanglements : Revisiting Gender in Rapidly Changing Asia* (Nias Press, 2015): 209.

⁹ Connie Bayudan-Dacuycuy and Joseph Anthony Lim, “Chronic and Transient Poverty and Vulnerability to Poverty in the Philippines: Evidence Using A Simple Spells Approach.” In *Social Indicators Research*. 118, no. 1 (2014): 390.

there may be success, there is always a chance for radical failure and setback, and for many, this is not a reality that can continue.

This level of poverty, and more importantly the economic vulnerability it leads to, remains the omnipotent catalyst of human trafficking. Despite the Philippines' on-going economic development, the country's attempts to "modernize its old agriculture-based economy by leapfrogging to services without first establishing a steady foothold in manufacturing"¹⁰ has led to not just environmental instability, but structural poverty for many of the population who border the poverty line. Economic growth is neither stable nor sustainable.

In order to begin and address such problems, Philippine nationals have found a unique solution to the problem that plague, not just the Philippines, but Southeast Asia in areas such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Hong Kong where the transit of people is most prominent due to the unguarded sea borders.¹¹ For many of the poor, the answer is to send members of the household away in the hopes at the chance of better employment, and better income. Unlike its neighboring countries, the Philippine economy relies on the income that Oversea Filipino Workers (hereafter known as OFWs) send back home to their families from their employment in other countries. Data from the Asian Development Bank's 2018 profile of the country denotes that transferred overseas wealth accounts for 10% of the country's total GDP and sustains almost one-third of its population.¹² Remittances travel throughout the country, and remain an integral part of its economy without a solution for better alternatives of wealth.

10 ABS CBN News, "Analysis: Why Many in the Philippines are Poor," April 19, 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/blogs/business/04/19/18/analysis-why-many-in-the-philippines-are-poor>.

11 Celia Leones and Donna Caparas, *Trafficking in Human Beings from the Philippines: A Survey of Government Experts and Law Enforcement Case Files* (United Nations Global Programme against Trafficking in Human Beings, 2003): 7.

12 Asian Development Bank, "Poverty," Ibid.

The combined unpredictability of rural and agricultural endeavors therefore leads members of Filipino households to migrate away from the home towards better opportunities in the cities, and abroad. While homesteads located in the country are not abandoned, select members are encouraged to travel for better employment opportunities, especially women. While their male counterparts and young children stay, female heads of households are encouraged to leave and send back remittances to their families. World Bank figures show that in these cases, poverty dropped 9.3%, from 23.4 to 14.1% among recorded households.¹³ Unlike their male counterparts, OFW women who work in the cities and abroad do not limited to manual labor but instead, often fine work as domestic workers or work in the service and entertainment industries. The market is heavily disproportionate in relation to gender with 83% of domestic workers being female.¹⁴ However, herein often lies the dangers of human trafficking.

Young Filipinas leave their small villages for better opportunities in urbanized Philippine cities and rapidly developing neighboring countries of the Asia-Pacific and beyond. They are motivated to contribute to a collective society where family always comes before the individual because the “family is seen as the basic unit of Filipino society.”¹⁵ Such motivation leaves this demographic vulnerable to one of the most common doors to sex trafficking— debt bondage.

Bonded Debt and Indentured Mobility

As remittances provide such a crucial income to the poor, there is a market for those who act as recruiters for employers and as go-betweens for those who wish to travel for work, and who abuse this role to ensnare women into debt bondage. Women typically sign up for a

13 Warwick, *Making Growth Work for the Poor*, 37.

14 Kara, *Modern Slavery*, Ibid, 183.

15 Tsai, “Family Financial Roles,” Ibid, 335.

recruitment agency that organizes their training for migration to neighboring countries and top destination countries such as the United States, Japan, South Korea, Jordan, Italy, and Taiwan, where opportunities of employment are more readily available for Philippine Overseas Workers.¹⁶ There is an agreement that such time and effort on their behalf will be paid off over time through wage deduction instead of upfront.¹⁷ However, such cases as the one of Joyce, mentioned by Kara in his book (2017), from the Philippines demonstrate the expectations of this agreement do not always meet the reality.

Joyce did what many others do— follow a recruiter with the hopes of a better job opportunity. Like many, she expected to become a domestic worker or an entertainer overseas after training. Instead, she arrived in Singapore confused. Joyce recalls her confusion:

Min gave us tea and told us she was the owner of the club. She said we had to be with clients to pay off the fees of our training and then we can work for housecleaning. She said it was not difficult work and we would like it. She said if we stayed with her after our debt we could send more money to our families than in housekeeping.¹⁸

The tea she drank was drugged. When she awoke, she woke up in bed in pain. Trusting in a recruiter, Joyce found herself as a victim of not just sex trafficking, but labor trafficking thereafter, where one easily leads into another. Isolated and away from her family, she was vulnerable to the demands of her traffickers who withheld her travel documents and ability until her debt was paid.

Despite her trauma, when able to contact her family back in the Philippines, she never told them of her situation because she still needed to provide: “I wanted to return home, but I needed to earn money for my family.”¹⁹ Kara’s record of Joyce’s experience is tragic— that

16 Leones, *Ibid*, 6.

17 Kara, *Modern Slavery*, *Ibid*, 185.

18 *Ibid*, 184.

19 *Ibid*, 185.

cannot be denied. However, he individualizes this story of many through the eyes of one; it's the experience of one, but not necessary the experience of all. While it may be true that Joyce's mindset mimics many of those who attempt to travel overseas for better terms of income for their families, the story is qualifiable, not quantifiable. While accounts are valuable in showing the presence and brutality of sex trafficking of Filipinas, they perpetuate— perhaps inadvertently— extreme narratives of victimization. Such stories can simplify the experience of women, project them as naïve martyrs, that despite their hardships and loneliness, they remain centered on a collective attitude, anything to keep their families out of the poverty cycle. But this is only part of the story.

The voice of many give shape to a larger more complex narrative. Multiple sources give voice to the plight of these women and the challenges they face. Kara's commentary on the subject is not uncommon but is one example that through legal means of migration, one of the Philippines' most vulnerable groups are misled into terrible situations but continue to endure. Similar information parallels information found in Rhacel Salazar Parreñas' 2011.²⁰ The trend in academic research is clear— despite the risks, despite the trauma, victims truly *believe* the potential rewards just may be worth it.²¹

The story of trafficking is not always so radical and not always so obvious and clear as it was in Kara's captured account. Sometimes it means going in with your eyes wide shut. In Parreñas' research, the inclination of Filipina women into trafficking is controversial.

Perceptions of human trafficking are consider it a worldwide pandemic, without clear lines and

20 Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, "The Indentured Mobility of Migrant Hostess" in *Illicit Flirtations: labor, migration, and sex trafficking in Tokyo* (Stanford University Press 2011), 4.

21 Parreñas, *Illicit*, Ibid, 18. In her work, Parreñas notes that hostesses she interviewed immigrated to Japan to escape poverty and in the pursuit of dreams, despite the great possibility of being trafficked into sex work.

statistics. Yet, according to the report included in *Illicit Flirtations*, the United States' State Department's *Trafficking in Persons Report* (TIP Report), Filipina hostesses in Japan make up 10% of the world's trafficked people worldwide.²² Contractually, immigrated Filipinx²³ hostesses are only expected to sing and dance, but according to Parreñas, there is an understanding for more, if the customer asks.

For some critics, because of this preconceived understanding, there is a question of whether this constitutes trafficking. After all, *some* choice exists. There is an awareness of the dangers, and a decision that the rewards of high monetary income and remittance are worth it. However, the exploitation is clear— although Filipinx have migrated for work as hostesses in the country for a better income, the subtext of exploitation is present and adheres to the important definitions defined by the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons' Article 3, paragraph (a):

[T]he recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purposes of exploitation.²⁴

The experiences noted in Parreñas' book demonstrate exploitation in employment, with potential implications for important documents, leaving such Filipinx hostesses more susceptible:

Contract workers cannot choose their club of employment but instead are bound to work for their sponsoring employer and other Filipinos who take advantage of their vulnerability by withholding their wages or overcharging their housing; and lastly, the permanent residency of wives is contingent on five years of marriage to a Japanese spouse,

22 Parreñas, *Illicit Flirtations*, Ibid, 4.

23 Filipinx is used here and elsewhere in place of "Filipina" to include both heteronormative Filipina nationals, and nonbinary and trans members included in this study. Rather than choosing one term over the other, I attempt to use the term most appropriate for each context.

24 The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, "What is Human Trafficking," *United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime*, last modified January 2019, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html>.

an unequal relationship of dependency that leaves them susceptible to domestic violence.²⁵

The narrative comes in all shapes and sizes. The restrictions Parreñas outlines as common among these women, parallel those created by the debt bondage in Joyce’s case, yet these accounts by the author acknowledge the fact that such women are not mere victimized martyrs. Although the situation is not nearly as radical, such situations still threaten the autonomy of the individual because they withhold financial independence and mobility.

It is not easy for these Filipinx, who have traveled away from their homes for better opportunities to leave these opportunities when they become difficult. To return home without money or income to their home communities leaves them to face high levels of social stigma and rejection from their own family members.²⁶ They are trapped in their situation, exploited for their circumstances and easily trapped into a cycle of human trafficking.²⁷

The repercussions alone are difficult— criminalization, deportation, and the burden of financial penalties alone deter the individual from trying to leave their situation. So, where is the choice? Autonomy is extremely limited. *Despite* the choice to leave the Philippines for Japan, *despite* the choice to become a hostess, and *despite* the choice to knowingly go into this kind of work, regardless of the more explicit and known sexualized work, poverty remains the wall that keeps these women trapped.

25 Parreñas, *Illicit Flirtations*, Ibid, 6.

26 Tsai, “Family Financial Roles,” Ibid, 335.

27 The term, “human trafficking” is used in this case to generalize the situation above. While the paper does draw a focus to sex trafficking, sex and labor trafficking act synonymously in Parreñas’ report of hostesses in Japan.

Falling into the Victim Narrative and Moving Beyond It

In order to see the whole picture, it is very important to give voice to the sex trafficking survivors who break away from this trap of exploitation. While it must always be acknowledged such women are victims of their experiences, it must be honored that they *are* survivors with the potential for more.

Despite the difficulty of leaving situations of trafficking, the current research on the victimization of Filipina sex trafficking survivors remain focal. It's an easy story to follow with an easy cause to support. In Mina Roces' chapter "Prostitution, Women's Movements, and the Victim Narrative" in *Women's Movements and the Filipina: 1986-2008* she outlines how this reduction of the cyclical narrative is a tool that achieves the needs of the movements (i.e. Women's movements, feminist movements, and advocacy for anti-trafficking), but fails to recognize the needs and agency of the individual.²⁸

The discussion of sex trafficking in the Philippines has since been centralized around the victim narrative in prostitution and women survivorship. Now as considered among activists as Violence Against Women (VAW), the discussion of prostitution is one currently shaped around a prostitute's lack of agency. In the context, Roces notes this comes from the Philippines' "existing cultural construction of the feminine that idealize the woman as martyr."²⁹ Women are depicted as self-sacrificing, willing to do anything for the sake of duty and family without thought for the self.

I shifted in the context of prostitution and sex work, feminist activities since the late 1980's have since attempted to apply, label the women involved in prostitution as involuntary

28 Mina Roces, "Prostitution, Women's Movements, and the Victim Narrative" in *Women's Movements and the Filipina: 1986-2008* (University of Hawaii Press 2012): 52.

29 Roces, "Prostitution, Women's Movements," Ibid, 53.

victims of their own situations. While testimonials have proven this to be true, the narrative is reductive, sliding Filipina women into the role of “victim” without necessarily a way out.³⁰ This was not done without purpose. In the on-going international debate of prostitution as VAW or as autonomous sex work, Philippine advocacy groups, such as Coalitions Against Trafficking of Women, Asia-Pacific, founded in 1993 in Manila as a part of the Vienna World Conference, asserted that prostitution was a form of VAW, that “prostitution is unwanted sex for women and therefore ‘paid rape,’”³¹ and pushed the victim narrative for the sake of policy, so that the country may understand prostitution as a problem rather than a form of income. Published anthologies and magazine articles further argued the point of NGOs pushing for policy to deglamorize prostitution as a form of victimization and violence rather than an occupation.³²

In previous years, the country’s capital of Manila was known as the “international sex city” or as the “sex capital of Asia,” which only furthered to condense the image of Filipina women as sexual objects, fetishized as exotics of the orient.³³ Such marketing promoted leisure tourism in the Philippines, and provided its people and government income. For feminist advocates, this could not continue.

The legacy of previous decades needed amendment, and for advocates, the victim narrative paved the way for that. By establishing the idea of a victim without *any* form of choice, whether in or out of prostitution, the notion of prostitution as VAW could be more easily understood and digested for public consumption because anything more complicated, more nuanced would falter in the face of economic need. What the victim narrative initially offered

30 Roces, Ibid.

31 Roces, Ibid, 56.

32 Roces, Ibid.

33 Ibid, 55.

feminist advocacy groups was a way in, a way to lobby for women's rights, a way to pass law and policy with public approval.

This is only further exacerbated as the global community took notice of human trafficking in its pervasive corners of the world. By the year 2000, the United Nations had officially defined human trafficking, and the subsets of labor and sex trafficking in the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and Protocols.³⁴ This in turn created greater pressure for developing nations to address the issues as well. In the case of the Philippines, this pressure only added to local outcry. Efforts beginning in the latter half of the 1990's found success into the 2000's with such successes as the passing of the Republic Act (RA) No. 9208, otherwise known as Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act in 2003.³⁵ This aligned with the goals of the country's feminist advocacy groups as it legally placed blame on the persons and constructs of the trafficking of women and children, and punished those who exploited the vulnerable through varied means unmentioned before in Philippine law, including in the disguise of arranged marriage, adoption, pornography, sex tourism, etc.

This issue remains a pertinent subject of human rights with rising trends both in the Asia Pacific and globally. Human trafficking is not a new method of exploitation, but simply a rebranding of slavery among weak infrastructures and vulnerable populations. This transformation is significant. In order to address this issue on a global scale, it needs to be clearly defined and understood. This is especially true for the Asia Pacific region and the Philippines because data indicates a major population of those trafficked (especially women) are from this region and are moved predominantly among Asia Pacific countries. This study acknowledges the

34 The definition was previously stated in this paper.

35 Roces, "Prostitution, Women's Movements," Ibid, 52.

importance of earlier advocacy efforts and progress made. At the same time, by examining the aggravating factors of human and sex trafficking, and the use of the victim narrative as a now outdated paradigm, we can highlight potential new solutions that support agency among survivors and encourage them to rise above victimhood.

Laws That Help and Hinder

Initially, such declarations were declared a win because it recognized the victimization of the vulnerable. However, this did not necessarily mean it was effective; in fact despite good intentions, Philippine laws and policies connected to human trafficking, and especially sex trafficking proved to be far too reductive, hindering the vulnerable just as much as it helped. The very population they intended to assist found themselves inconvenienced and harmed instead.

With the rapid development of laws to hinder human trafficking, the laws themselves failed to recognize the nuances of survivor needs. In 2010, the Philippine government instituted an offloading as an anti-trafficking policy, when the U.S. Department TIP Report ranked the Philippines as a “Tier 2 Watch List,”³⁶ which outlines that very idea— although the Philippines’ emigration policy is well-intentioned in tackling the potential exploitation of its women, a standard, stereotypical profile is utilized; in order to reduce the number of female victims, women are reduced to victims alone.

The pressures for the Philippines to rise to global standard in the wake of the United Nations twenty-first century expectations of how to tackle international crime resulted in the country attempting to rapidly prepare itself against human trafficking. This proved especially

36 Maria Cecilia Hwang “Offloaded: Women’s Sex Work Migration across the South China Sea and the Gendered Antitrafficking Emigration Policy of the Philippines.” In *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 45 no. 1/2 (2017): 138.

true with the possibility of the Philippines losing in millions of dollars in nonhumanitarian aid from the United States if it wasn't addressed.³⁷ The policy imbued officers of the Bureau of Immigration with the power to “regulate the individual right to travel whenever there is a reasonable detection of trafficking situation by immigration officers and personnel”³⁸ In short, this policy of “offloading” granted immigration officers the means to prevent Filipinx nationals from traveling if factors of trafficking could be identified or argued.

Due to their potential for vulnerability and exploitation, and potential to become victims of sex trafficking, women were turned away and denied ability to leave the country because the policy operates under a suspicion of those likely to face exploitation abroad.³⁹ Especially for the poor, it makes it even harder to immigrate for work, or anything else. In Hwang's interviews, the experience became clear:

It's so difficult now to leave the Philippines! They [immigration officers] ask so many questions. Show money. Are you a tourist? Where's your ticket? And they call the airline company to confirm your return flight. One time, they asked me to queue up in an area outside the immigration [secondary inspection]. I had to fill up something and I put how much money I had. They interviewed me. Good thing I was able to prove that I had money (P40,000 [\$803]).⁴⁰

If one looks poor, or could potentially be poor, they have a much harder time of immigrating outside the country. Ironically, this in turn leaves a portion more vulnerable than ever, as Philippine immigration agents have been known to ask for great bribes and exorbitant fees to let Filipinas leave, and/or took the roles as pimps, placing the girls in nightclubs overseas and

37 Hwang, Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Hwang, “Offloaded,” Ibid, 139.

40 Ibid, 138.

entrapping them in debt.⁴¹ The initial intentions of this offloading law ultimately gave the border patrol far too much power, underlining the victim concept for women even more.

The rules meant to help potential trafficking victims act as a hindrance to the very population they are designed to help. The Philippine government runs as a congressional republic, with a house and senate to create laws, and the country's politicians created laws that did not necessarily help its country's victims, but instead simply appeased the voice of lobbyists calling for change. The laws were narrowminded, focused on the victim, but not the survivor and what she needs. Philippine policy on immigration, especially, has deficiencies in its assistance in its attempts to curb sex trafficking and help its survivors because the rules of migration are never gender neutral.⁴² The country's current policies, such as Republic Act (RA) 8042 focus on protecting its vulnerable without necessarily allowing them to help themselves. Furthermore, beyond just the scope of Philippine law, the scope of NGOs does something similar.

Initial financial help may be offered by organizations for survivors attempting to acclimate back into Filipino society, including alternative employment opportunities and training for a decided period of time, but fails to help in creating a path of autonomy there afterwards. What is needed is education. What is needed is safe employment. What is needed is financial stability. And what is needed most of all is the shift in focus from the label of "victim" to that of "survivor."

41 Ibid, 14.

42 Jean Encinas-Franco, "Filipino Women Migrant Workers and Overseas Employment Policy: An Analysis from Women's Rights Perspective." In *Asian Politics and Policy* Vol. 8 Issue 3 (2016).

NGO Efforts vs Cultural and Gender Dynamics

While laws and legal policies still await to be amended, non-profits have made their own attempts at helping sex trafficking survivors formulate agency outside the poverty cycle.

Founded in the late 1990's, groups such as The Development Action of Women Network (DAWN), The Third World Movement Against the Trafficking of Women (TW-MAE-W) and Coalitions Against Trafficking of Women, Asia-Pacific (CATW-AP) have acted as the largest advocates of Filipinx sex trafficking survivors through opportunities for alternative employment and the promotion of new legalized policy.⁴³

However, despite attempts to address the financial and legal needs of sex trafficking survivors, addressing this one facet is not enough. Noted specifically in the case study conducted by Laura Cordisco Tsai in Cebu, Visayas, addressing the financial needs alone do not help survivors gain agency. Thirty women and their families were safely recruited by the author with the help of local NGO's who referred the clients and their families to the study.

For many survivors, it became clear that the main concern in returning home was debt, lack of savings, and returning to home as failed provider of economic remittance.⁴⁴ Even after leaving terrible situations in which they were trafficked, the welfare of the family remained paramount. There is a fear not only to be perceived as a financial failure, but as a failed provider of the family, and the isolation that comes with that experience. Tsai's study indicates that both before and after, poverty remains the concern and the cultural expectations to remedy the situation its catalyst. In 96% of households, the role of financial manager fell upon the women of the family, with 60% of survivors taking direct responsibility.⁴⁵ This falls in line with the

43 Roces, "Prostitution, Women's Movements," Ibid, 54.

44 Tsai, "Family financial roles," Ibid, 334.

45 Ibid, 336.

attributes of Philippine culture, in which the family is the nexus of all motivation and action of the individual, and where the women of the household play the role of attending to its survival and internal needs by any means possible, which often began the cycle of vulnerability and trafficking in the first place.⁴⁶

That being said, in a survivor's return to the Philippines, and to the family, this responsibility does not fade, but only grows stronger. NGO's in turn have attempted to address this need, by opening alternative opportunities for income. However, it became clear that even when there proved to be sufficient income to cover a household's basic needs, survivors received major pushback from their families, especially their partners, for their lack of means and a disposable income.

This became especially clear in the experience of Luz⁴⁷, a twenty-four-year-old survivor who lived with her boyfriend and young son. While she managed a sari-sari store while in pursuit of a high school diploma through an NGO scholarship, she struggled to keep her family above the poverty line because of her partner:

Out of concern about [her boyfriend]'s spending habits, Luz claimed each of his paychecks in persons so that she could ensure his income would be spent to the benefit of the entire household. [Her boyfriend] regularly took alcohol and cigarettes from her sari-sari store without her knowledge. Although she set limits to the amount that he could take from the store, [he] still took alcohol in excess of his limit.⁴⁸

While it was obviously a concern for Luz to support the basic needs of the family, the same could not be said about her partner. The responsibility fell on her, as the only responsible member of the household, to make ends meet, one way or another.

46 Ibid.

47 Names were changed in the study to protect survivor identities.

48 Ibid, 339.

However, it is clear that beyond just addressing the issue of an irresponsible partner, Luz, like others, also faced considerable challenges in obtaining proper employment upon returning back to their respective communities; in Tsai's case study, the reason for this points to a limited education, for none of those without a high school diploma held full-time employment.⁴⁹

In Pinay survivors' attempts of re-entry into their communities after trafficking, autonomy was difficult to achieve. Their respective environments expected them to provide, expected them to bring home similar incomes to when they were away, and this fails to be addressed properly in policies and NGO models. The difficult re-entry process is overlooked as well: "In the counter-trafficking sector, much attention is directed towards the human rights abuses that occur *during* the trafficking process. The stigmatization and lack of livelihood options experienced by survivors upon their return are given less consideration."⁵⁰ Without a way to address the financial instability that exists before and cannot be ignored after, survivors remain victims despite their attempts to move forward, to become free agents of their own lives. The cultural and engendered pressure surrounding Pinay survivors needs to be addressed. Otherwise, the temptation to return to a life of exploitation and sex work⁵¹ may be too great to resist.

Survivor Models with Cultural Competence

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid, 342.

51 While there is a demographic that willingly goes into commercial sex work, the topic remains beyond the scope of this paper. The term "sex work" in this paper addresses the population reluctant to return to this field of work, who feels they have little choice in determining their own lives.

The transition from one's experience as a victim to one as a free autonomous survivor of human trafficking is imperative in ensuring one does not return to a life of exploitation and vulnerability. Yet, it remains a difficult subject for the Philippines to address through law and policy because remittance and human trafficking are so closely tied; that cannot be denied. The country walks a fine line as it develops and attempts to be better. Broad stroke policies act as band-aids to the larger interconnected global issue, while localized NGOs try their own methods.

However, the issues of human trafficking, especially the survivorship of sex trafficking victims, are not comprehensively addressed; turning towards financial issues alone are not enough because basic human needs are not addressed first. Before victims can identify themselves as anything more than victims, before they can advocate for themselves, such basic needs should be met first.⁵² In Tsai's case study, this appears to be what localized NGO assistance lacked.

Specifically, when defining a Filipina sex trafficking survivor's basic needs, we see there is so much more than just the immediate and obvious. Utilizing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs⁵³, to begin helping a victim, we must consider United States models that have three tiers: physiological needs: including food, water, warmth, and rest; safety and security in one's environment; and a feeling of necessity, belonging, and love.⁵⁴ Until such needs are first met, policymakers and those trafficked cannot move beyond the identity and narrative of victimization.

In the family financial case study, for example, this is what fails. In Luz's own experience, physiological needs may be met, but security, trust, and belonging and love in her

52 Ed. Annalisa Enrile, "Survivor Advocate Model" in *Ending Human Trafficking & Modern-Day Slavery* (Sage Publishing 2018): 135.

53 Enrile, "Survivor Advocate Model," Ibid, 135.

54 Enrile, "Survivor Advocate Model," Ibid.

family unit are debatably lacking. She cannot trust the individuals in her environment (i.e. her boyfriend) to ensure the basic needs of herself or her child.

Paralleling this situation is that of Mariel, a twenty-two-year-old survivor who lived with her boyfriend and his family and was receiving help from an anti-trafficking NGO in completing not only her high school certification, but in receiving training for alternative employment in housekeeping. During this time, she was forbidden to seek further assistance in this endeavor by her partner and attempted to leave to be with her own family due to her partner's potential drug use and exploitation of her. However, she returned because basic needs were not able to be met.⁵⁵ Her reasoning followed Maslow's hierarchy. Although her partner and his family failed to meet her basic needs higher on the pyramid (i.e. in safety, belonging, and love), her own family was starving, unable to secure the basic physiological requirements of food, water, and warmth. So, in turn, she came back to her restrictive boyfriend and his family, and dropped out of the local NGO assistance programs she was in.⁵⁶

The fact of the matter is that in these instances and many others, the current model doesn't necessarily allow a victim to work with the support necessary in order to begin building agency. Rather, there needs to be more done, building *on* Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and the United States Survivor Advocate Model does just that because it is "founded concretely in empowerment theory and draws directly from the feminist principles of the personal is political, solidarity, and sisterhood."⁵⁷

55 Tsai, "Family financial roles," Ibid, 340.

56 Ibid.

57 Enrile, "Survivor Advocate Model," Ibid, 135.

While the critique that such solutions to trafficking “flatten the experiences of victims with the universal implementation”⁵⁸ the factors of the Survivor Advocate Model attempt to address that critique in its empowerment of victims into survivors by honoring the unique experiences of the individual. This, in part, is due to the very nature of the model, which relies on the individual to define the terms of transition from victim to survivor, and relies on working to accomplish that through these approaches: trauma-informed care, in which the victim addresses the trauma of their trafficking experience with care instead of suppressing or denying its occurrence; change of personal narrative, in which the victim recognizes their trafficked experience is something that happened to them but *does not* define their identity; a social justice oriented and strength-based model, in which they recognize their own equality to others and recognize their strengths despite all past experiences; and an emphasis on cultural context, in which clinicians and the victim use cultural competence to best help the victim gain advocacy and independence for themselves.⁵⁹

By using Maslow’s hierarchy, and promoting a shift in mindset towards empowerment, survivors have the possibility to rise above this simplistic narrative of victimization towards true agency and independence, a life beyond their traumatic experience and vulnerability. Simply put: it is not enough to give an individual the tools, if you don’t guide them in how to use them.

That being said, in the Filipinx context, these aspects need to be navigated to provide the right care and approach to help the woman transition from victim to survivor because cultural pressures and stigmas can lead to a great possibility of relapse. Especially by understanding the familial gender roles when operating from a Survivor Advocate Model, can we be sure that

58 Parreñas, *Illicit*, Ibid, 6. Often, U.S. solution models are critiqued in their broad generalization of experiences, as are many others.

59 Enrile, “Survivor Advocate Model,” Ibid, 139.

attentive measures are taken to ensure an individual's safety and empowerment in the societal re-entry.

My Sister's House and DAWN

Cultural sensitivity remains paramount in the effort to help individuals transition from helpless victims to autonomous survivors and yet for many NGOs, it does not remain a priority. For Filipina survivors, however, this emphasis is crucial. Understanding that family is indeed a pivotal part of a victim and a survivor's life in community re-entry, NGO's wanting to help their clients need to be culturally equipped to navigate this field.

An example of this is first noted by the organization known as My Sister's House, Inc.

Founded in 2000 in Sacramento, California the organization's mission is to:

To serve *Asian and Pacific Islander* and other underserved women and children impacted by domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking by providing a culturally appropriate and responsive safe haven, job training, and community services.⁶⁰

Although the organization can cater to clientele of different ethnicities, the organization specifically targets work with Asian and Pacific Islander groups, and organizes around cultural competence, something that many fail to address. Despite the critiques that solution-based NGOs use a "one-size-fits-all template of the 3R (rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration) and the 3Ps (prosecution, protection, and prevention)"⁶¹ to deal with human trafficking, the organization attempts to incorporate not only inclusivity of varied language, but trains both its employees and

60 My Sister's House, "Vision and Mission," *My Sister's House*, <http://www.my-sisters-house.org/us/>. Emphasis was added.

61 Parreñas, *Illicit*, Ibid, 6.

volunteers to navigate culturally sensitive terrain and work with Asian Pacific Islanders so that as women with unique and individual cultural backgrounds their needs are met.

Noting specifically the resources the organizations offers, there is an understanding of promoting a Survivor Advocate Model for victims with cultural competency that address the factors needed for proper societal integration. Safety shelters for women and children are offered with learning support groups to ensure that Maslow's hierarchy of needs is met while those trafficked begin their transition from victims to survivors through educational and vocational training and employment.⁶² The organization's models help not just Filipinx trafficking victims, but work towards larger issues, yet never ignores the needs of the victim and the resources she needs to become an autonomous survivor. This still remains the most important aspect.

Although My Sister's House, Inc. is a small local organization located in the United States, it addresses the issues that many local Philippine NGOs fail to acknowledge— sometimes the community that a victim returns to may not necessarily be the safest. Understanding the culture and stigma a victim will return to is the opportunity to armor the individual with the tools and agency she needs to do better, not only for herself but for the family she cares so much for.

The second organization DAWN notes this very difference in its own address of Filipina survivorship. Working specifically with often pregnant victims returning from Japan, DAWN attempts to equip their clientele with aspects of the Survivor Advocate Model (i.e. support groups, alternative employment, and even working to locate children's biological fathers to demand income for families).⁶³ Like My Sister's House, this organization provides a great start for victims to find their grounding in the re-entry of their respective communities and is unique

62 My Sister's House, "Getting Help," *My Sister's House*, <http://www.my-sisters-house.org/getting-help/>.

63 Roces, "Prostitution, Women's Movements," *Ibid*, 53.

in addressing the aftermath of sex trafficking from multiple aspects and from a supportive standpoint. However, these two organizations are just a start.

Conclusion

In pursuit of my answer to the original research questions, the expectation was to first and foremost create a comprehensive understanding of sex trafficking in the Philippines as it affects young Pinays. Women are caught in a web of poverty and cultural and geographical forces that make the fight for agency very challenging. Policies have helped us shift the scales of power to some extent, but the narrative shift needs more time to take place. As we move from a paradigm based on victimhood towards one based on empowerment, it is better to focus on getting at the root issues of the problem. It is possible to acknowledge how its current policies work (and don't) to address this complicated narrative and shape solutions utilized around the world that will improve the situation of victims with the desire to be more—to be survivors. Although Philippine policy does not currently support the full survivorship of Filipina sex trafficking victims, non-governmental organizations are the start as long as they address the issues of re-entry fully, truthfully, because ultimately the story of sex trafficking is one of the vulnerable. The story of sex trafficking is one of the invisible. *But*, the story of sex trafficking should never be the one of the forgotten. The story of sex trafficking should never be an easy one for it leaves far too many left behind. We need to shift the narrative: into one where women are visible, their stories are remembered and learned from, and their agency is the central focus. More should be done.

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