



Youth for Youth Against Human Trafficking. The Sabah Saga

Presentation by Mary Anne K. Baltazar

Pusat Kebajikan Good Shepherd – Good Shepherd Welfare Centre, Sabah, Malaysia

Young People Against Prostitution and Human Trafficking:

The Greatest Violence Against Human Beings

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Phenomena of Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia

Human trafficking has long been a problem in South East Asia. As countries in Southeast Asia strive to develop themselves and build their economies, demand for labour has increased. This, coupled with poverty, low wages, conflict and lack of jobs in some countries have pushed many out of their countries in search for a better life. In Southeast Asia, trafficking is predominantly for forced labour. More than 22 million victims of human trafficking pass through Southeast Asia.

Malaysia

Malaysia is a major receiving country of migration in South East Asia. It is also a destination and to a lesser extent, a source and transit country for men, women and children subjected to forced labour and women and children subjected to sex trafficking.

Recently in the 2014 Trafficking in Persons report, Malaysia received an automatic downgrade to Tier 3 after being in the Tier 2 Watch List for 4 consecutive years. Malaysia was granted two consecutive waivers during the 2012 and 2013 Trafficking in Persons Report from a required downgrade to Tier 3 on the basis of a written plan to bring itself into compliance with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. Majority of the trafficking victims are among the estimated two million documented and two million or more undocumented foreign workers in Malaysia.

Because Malaysia did not sign any conventions or protocols relating to the status of refugees, refugees in Malaysia lack formal status or the ability to obtain work permits under the Malaysian law, making them vulnerable to trafficking. UNHCR estimates 80,000 Filipino Muslims without legal status which includes 10,000 children who resides in the state of Sabah. There are a small number of Malaysian citizens who have been trafficked internally as well as externally for commercial sexual exploitation to Australia, China, France, Japan, Singapore, Solomon Islands, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.

Sabah

There are thirteen states in Malaysia and Sabah is the poorest state. Sabah shares a border with Philippines and Indonesia. Because of this, Sabah has fluid cultural, social and economic boundaries with both countries and is the gateway for Filipino and Indonesian migrants to migrate out of their countries. According to the Statistics Department of Malaysia, in 2010 the population in Sabah is 3,206,742 in which 2,316,963 (72.25%) are citizens while 889,779 (27.75%) are non-citizens. This figure does not include the large number of those who are undocumented. In relation to trafficking, Sabah is mostly a receiving and a transit state, and to a lesser extent, a source state for trafficked victims.

To the neighbouring countries, Malaysia poses as an attractive country because of its strong economic growth, low unemployment rate and high demand for cheap and unskilled labour. For Sabah, industries in which human trafficking are mostly found in the commercial sex industries and the plantation sectors. Other than that, there are also a significant number of cases in domestic work and service sectors.

Even though most trafficking cases that we have encountered are for labour trafficking, a significant number of women are also being prostituted. Most of the women we met who were prostituted were promised other jobs. The women have reported that they were given the choice not to do 'bookings' with customers but they will not receive any pay. This means that they will not have any money to buy food. Some women have reported not eating for a few days if they do not take any 'bookings'.

Pusat Kebajikan Good Shepherd (Good Shepherd Welfare Centre)

Pusat Kebajikan Good Shepherd (PKGS) is a not-for-profit NGO founded by the Good Shepherd Sisters since 1960. The Good Shepherd Sisters is a worldwide congregation of women religious present in 73 countries in six continents. The congregation is an NGO with Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC, United Nations. In Malaysia, The Good Shepherd Nuns (Incorporated) Act 1973 (Act 108) is a statutory body having perpetual succession.

The focus of PKGS is to make visible the mercy and forgiving love of God, specifically to those who are marginalized and broken, especially women, girls and their families, restoring in them their worth and dignity. We reach out and welcome each person with respect and dignity, accompanying each one with care and compassion.

In Malaysia, PKGS has extensive grassroots services, both remedial and preventive, reaching out to women/ girls in pregnancy and other forms of crisis, women and their children experiencing domestic violence, children and youth who have limited access to educational opportunities and more recently work with refugees and migrants.

The Centres and their location are as follows:

1. Pusat Kebajikan Good Shepherd (Teenage Centre), Ampang, Selangor
2. Pusat Kebajikan Good Shepherd (Women Shelter)
3. Rose Virginie Good Shepherd Centre, Ipoh, Perak
4. Seri Murni Crisis Centre, Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan
5. Youth PREP Centre, Alamesra, Kota Kinabalu
6. Asrama Desa Pukak, Kiulu, Sabah
7. Learning / Mobile Children Programme, Sabah

The above programmes are co-ordinated and carried out by a team of personnel comprising Good Shepherd sisters and partners who are committed and share the same vision, mission and core values of the organisation.

PKGS operates on the following ethos:

- Vision – One person is of more value than the whole world
- Mission – We reach out with compassion and respect, empowering each person to wholeness and full potential
- Core values – Compassion, Gratitude, Integrity, Respect, Zeal

Recommendations on Youth for Youth against Human Trafficking for Sex and Labour

Recommendation 1: Conduct awareness programmes for youths on sexual exploitation and human trafficking to those who are vulnerable, including local and migrant youths.

The Youth-PREP Centre (YPC) is the youth service of *Pusat Kebajikan Good Shepherd* (PKGS) or Good Shepherd Welfare Centre. The centre started in March 2010 and aims to provide youths with a point of reference particularly for those who are leaving home for the first time.

The YouthPREPLink programme conducted by YPC has been running since 2005 and is a programme to prepare youths to face and better manage the cultural and social realities experienced in society when they migrate from rural to urban locations in search of higher education and employment. YPC works with the youth commissions from all three dioceses in Sabah to run the YouthPREPLink programme for youths especially those who are going to graduate from secondary school. YPC conducts three YouthPREPLink programmes in a year. YPC has also started to conduct a YouthPREPLink Facilitators Training since 2013 for youth leaders from all three dioceses in Sabah to be able to conduct and facilitate the programme themselves.

YPC also conducts the Keeping Me Safe programme for schools. The programme aims to bring awareness to teenagers on their rights and dignity and on how to protect themselves from sexual abuse and exploitation. The programme also encourages youths to speak up, be heard and get help. The Keeping Me Safe programme has been running since 2010.

YPC is also involved in conducting awareness programmes for the women at the government shelter for trafficked women since 2013. PKGS is the only NGO with access to the government shelter in Sabah. Staff and volunteers reach out to the trafficked women three times a week through counselling, faith sharing, social awareness, cooking and handicraft sessions. A majority of the trafficked women who are in the shelter are in their early 20s and are in the age range of a youth. They were trafficked into Sabah for sex and/or labour.

In our interactions with the trafficked women, we provide emotional and spiritual support to uphold their dignity as human persons. We do case follow-up with the officers in the shelter, for example on their right to make a phone call, right to see a doctor when they are sick and other needs that will help them better cope with their stay at the shelter. We also journey with the residents and give them confidence and motivation to prepare for their court hearings. When the women are repatriated we connect them with Good Shepherd partners in their home country. Most of the trafficked women are from Indonesia and Philippines.

Recommendation 2: Reduce Vulnerability and Provide Education to Migrant Youths

Many children of migrants who are born in Sabah do not have documents which make them vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking. To reduce their vulnerability, PKGS assists with the birth registration process by working with the Indonesian embassy. The birth registration documents enable the migrant children to have an Indonesian identity thus ending their statelessness. With an identity they would be able to obtain education in Indonesia, providing them with opportunities for a better future as documented persons.

Other than that, PKGS reaches out to migrant communities in the plantations through basic literacy programmes for the stateless children and youths because they are not allowed into public schools. YPC also conducts the Keeping Me Safe programme for migrant youths. More awareness and education programmes should be conducted among the migrant youths to reduce their vulnerability to exploitation.

Recommendation 3: Partnership with government and enforcement agencies, embassies, church, faith based organisations, NGOs, corporations and individuals.

Engage with local authorities such as the police, shelter officers, embassies and immigration officers to discuss, share resources and work together for awareness programmes and also to come up with solutions that would best serve those who are being trafficked. Sometimes, the trafficked women at the Government shelter do not want to cooperate with the authorities. We found out that one of the reasons is because of the lack understanding about their current situation and lack of information on the progress of their cases. This could be due to no proper explanation being given or because of language barriers. Our work as NGO would be to facilitate better understanding between the government authorities and the trafficked women and vice versa so that both parties can collaborate to address the issue of human trafficking.

Engagement with the local church is essential because of the high population of Catholics in Sabah and the widespread reach and networks of the church especially in rural villages. This also includes the Filipino and Indonesian community in cities as well as in the plantations.

The church can play a big role by using their networks to support campaigns both regionally and internationally, to address the basic right to education for all children regardless of their nationality and to find solutions to problems that come with migration; both internally and externally. For our part, PKGS can train and build capacity of priests, religious, parish councillors and parishioners into the topic of human trafficking and safe migration.

Networking with other NGOs is also important to build a bigger and stronger voice among civil society. For example, to push for the removal of Malaysia's reservations in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, this includes non-discrimination; right to name and nationality; and free and compulsory education for all children at primary level. Another way would be to organise awareness campaigns through collaborations with other NGOs to address issues of violence against women and children, causes of prostitution such as gender inequality, poverty, demand for sex and the rights of women, through youthful and creative ways such as music and the arts.

On an ongoing basis, PKGS collaborates with other NGOs for the *1 Billion Rising* campaign, *#HentikanRogol* (Stop Rape) campaign, the *White Ribbon* campaign, the *Girl Child* campaign, *Voice Out Youth Art Festival* and *Orange Day* to build a bigger, wider and more active awareness of the public, in particular the youths, on issues surrounding women, youths and children in Sabah.

Risks and Challenges Going Forward

One of the main challenges that we face is the lack of awareness of human trafficking among the public in the country. This includes the local church. Because of this, there is not much support or importance given to programmes conducted on issues related to human trafficking, even at the church level. We spend a lot of time trying to convince other organisations, schools, and church groups on the importance of awareness programmes on human trafficking before we are given permission to conduct these programmes for their members.

Another significant challenge going forward is the limited funding that we have as a non-profit organisation. There are five of us in the youth team working full time in the organisation. A lot of funding bodies are more

interested to fund children based programmes which might be due to the lack of awareness and importance on issues that youths of today face. We have found it quite challenging to raise funds for the youth centre.

Currently, the Malaysian government is in the process of amending the Anti Trafficking in Persons and Anti Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 (Amendment 2010) to enable greater participation of NGOs in addressing the phenomenon of human trafficking in the country. Good Shepherd has indicated its interest to increase its collaboration beyond the activities that we currently conduct in the Government shelters in three different states in Malaysia to providing shelter facilities to the trafficked women in our own shelters. The current Anti Trafficking Act precludes NGOs to be places of refuge for trafficked persons.

Conclusion

Sabah will continue to develop as a state economy and migration into the state will not cease anytime soon. Because of this all stakeholders should work together and take the responsibility to find ways to mitigate, if not eradicate, human trafficking as best as we can. Even though there is still a long way to go, I believe that every little action we take for the cause today will be a stepping stone towards the eventual eradication of modern slavery and human trafficking. Echoing the vision of PKGS, "One person is of more value than the whole world", that even if what we do today affects only one survivor, I am sure that it will mean a lot to that one person.

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