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Salvation as violence: anti-trafficking and the rehabilitation of rescued Filipino women into moral subjects

By Sharmila Parmanand¹

Abstract

Philippine anti-trafficking and women's rights legislation constructs sex work as victimhood. This understanding of prostitution positions interventions such as raids, rescue operations, and rehabilitation programs as core strategies for "protecting" and "empowering" all sex workers, regardless of their individual circumstances. Rehabilitation in this context refers to a range of psychosocial, medical, education, legal, protective custody, and economic services that help those designated as victims recover and reintegrate into society. There is a glaring lack of data on whether the socio-economic situations of rehabilitated women have improved and the current spaces for political advocacy by "survivors" are controlled by their rescuers. This paper draws on extensive interviews with ten Filipino women who were placed in anti-trafficking shelters for rehabilitation, only four of whom identified as trafficking victim. Their experiences show that rehabilitation programs have fallen short of their own goals of providing women access to resources and upholding their self-determination, not least because rehabilitation opportunities were conditional on exiting sex work and cooperation in the prosecution of perpetrators, regardless of women's preferences. Furthermore, unless rescued women provided a credible performance of victimhood, they were abandoned, failed, and stigmatised by organisations that purported to care for them. This paper also argues that the disciplinary practices and moral regulations to which women were subjected are part of an ideological project that constructs sex work as deviance and directs women towards low-paying, labour-intensive alternatives that conform to normative femininity. In doing so, rehabilitation addresses the problem of trafficking by repairing "problematic" individuals rather than strengthening demands for social justice and redistribution.

Keywords: sex work, trafficking, rehabilitation, Philippines, victimhood, anti-trafficking, UN Trafficking Protocol, women's empowerment, critique of empowerment

Introduction

In May 2002, the Philippines became the first Asia-Pacific country to ratify the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (herein after UN Trafficking Protocol), a legally binding instrument that defines "trafficking in persons" as:

“...the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring 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

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payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs”.

Some sources suggest that there are millions of trafficking victims globally, while others argue that this data is spurious and unreliable (Weitzer 2007, p. 455). Trafficking laws are inextricably linked with the debate on prostitution. The UN Trafficking Protocol is a product of negotiations among government representatives and NGOs, most prominently feminist groups who differed strongly on prostitution. The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) and their allies argued that all forms of prostitution, regardless of whether force or deception took place, were a violation of women’s human rights, while the Human Rights Caucus argued that prostitution was not uniquely exploitative and should be treated like other forms of labour (Doezema 2002, p. 21). Key aspects of the final text were intentionally left vague, which gives rise to a definitional muddle on the status of prostitution (Chuang 2014, p. 610).

The Philippines is widely identified as a source country for trafficking victims (US Department of State, 2018, p. 352). It enacted its own Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act in 2003 after staunch lobbying led by the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women – Asia Pacific (CATW-AP), which is affiliated with CATW (Roces 2009, p. 273). This law mirrors the UN definition but also covers domestic cases, unlike the UN Trafficking Protocol, which only applies to transnational cases. The law mandated the creation of the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT) to oversee and monitor its implementation. IACAT is composed of government agencies and civil society organisations selected by them. The conflation of prostitution with victimhood is the dominant perspective in anti-trafficking in the Philippines (Tigno 2012, p. 24). However, the sale of sex remains a crime under the Philippines’ Revised Penal Code of 1930 (Art. 202). Therefore, there is a legal tension in how individuals who sell sex are viewed, with the Anti-Trafficking Law and Magna Carta of Women (enacted in 2009) suggesting that they are victims, but the RPC criminalising them.

Government agencies engaged in anti-trafficking conceive of rescue and rehabilitation programs as a process of turning “victims” into “survivors” and restoring their agency and dignity. The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), which is a co-chair of IACAT, defines rehabilitation for victim-survivors as direct services which include “psychosocial, medical, educational, legal, protective custody, and economic services that will enable the clients to recover from the traumatic experiences and successfully reintegrate with their families and communities” (2015, p. 3).

The Philippine Commission on Women (PCW), a member of IACAT, outlines the process in their *Guidelines on the Protection of the Rights of Trafficked Women*: The rescue team is composed of trained officers from the Philippine National Police or the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) and social workers from the DSWD or accredited NGOs (2013, pp. 11-14). Throughout the process, trafficked women are to be recognised as victims and their consent to the intended exploitation shall be irrelevant. After initial investigation by law enforcement, the women are to be turned over to the DSWD or any accredited NGO for case management. Women should not be detained or deprived of their liberty and their ethnic, cultural, and religious practices must be respected. PCW guidelines commit duty-bearers to the principle of “do no harm”, which is described as “the ethical responsibility... to assess the potential harm of any proposed action and postpone, discontinue or terminate such action, if there is any reason to believe that it will worsen

the individual's situation or condition", and to the right to self-determination and informed consent of victims (pp. 5-7).

In practice, these processes are more fluid: in some situations, individuals who sell sex are rescued and released. Sometimes, the "rescue" actually involves them being jailed, fined, harassed, or extorted. In other situations, rescue is followed by rehabilitation. The legal ambiguity on the status of prostitution in the Philippines creates an environment where these decisions are highly discretionary and provides opportunities for police corruption (Parmanand 2019, p. 62). In this paper, I interrogate the rehabilitation process based on data from individual interviews with ten women who were rescued from prostitution in Metro Manila. I argue that the disciplinary practices and moral regulations to which sex workers and trafficking victims are subjected during the rehabilitation process are part of an ideological project that constructs sex work as deviance and directs women towards low-paying, labor intensive alternatives that conform to normative femininity. In doing so, rehabilitation processes address the problem of trafficking by repairing "problematic" individuals rather than confronting state failure and complicity.

Theoretical framework

Anti-trafficking classifications, definitions, and statistics are not fixed and neutral. Anti-trafficking is a discourse, or a language and set of practices that "systematically forms the objects of which it speaks" (Foucault 1972, p. 54). Anti-trafficking discourse does not merely describe some pre-existing absolute truth about trafficking, but instead creates the "reality" of trafficking as we understand it. This does not mean that there is no material reality outside discourse. The actors identified in anti-trafficking narratives do exist and interact with each other in ways that are shaped by economic, gendered, and racial power hierarchies. It is within anti-trafficking discourse, however, that these interactions come to mean specific things. The language of prostitution as victimhood is a dominant feature of anti-trafficking discourse globally and in the Philippines, and this functions as a regime of truth that reifies specific understandings of "what the problem is" while foreclosing others.

In their website, IACAT defines prostitution as "any act, transaction, scheme or design involving the use of a person by another, for sexual intercourse or lascivious conduct in exchange for money, profit or any other consideration", which constructs individuals who sell sex as passive actors having exploitative acts done to them. Women in prostitution are imagined as victims of violence and incapable of legitimately consenting to sex work because their agency is undermined by poverty and desperation (PCW, n.d.). This language is used exclusively for prostitution, while other precarious workers are encouraged to mobilise for rights (Parmanand 2019, p. 64). The assumption that women who sell sex are abused by clients and third parties justifies "protective" interventions such as raids and rescue operations on streets, bars, massage parlours, and other establishments where sex workers operate (Ruiz Austria 2006, p. 109).

Methodology

The politics of knowledge production in anti-trafficking leads to a policy regime that reflects specific views on prostitution while excluding others. Fricker's (2007) conceptions of epistemic injustice are helpful in describing the exclusion of sex workers from important policy-making conversations. Testimonial injustice is prejudice that causes one to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word based on their identity (p. 17). Hermeneutical injustice is "the

injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding" because of a lack of access to social resources to make sense of one's own experiences (p. 154). Because sex work in the Philippines is criminalised, sex workers have struggled to publicly advocate for themselves. They are also designated by the PCW (n.d.) as having been deceived or forced into prostitution "until such time when (they) start believing that there is no other life for them outside of prostitution", which devalues the testimony of sex workers even before they have spoken. Furthermore, while anti-trafficking organisations tell powerful stories about a handful of trafficking survivors that are generalised to reflect the reality of everyone in prostitution, they do not provide comprehensive data about what happens to most rescued women after "rehabilitation" (Hames, et. al. 2010, p. 10). My research centres "views from below" to help correct these gaps. It also challenges the conflation of prostitution and victimhood by foregrounding stories that tell of a more complex reality. I recognise that my own positionality and social and institutional situatedness shape the results of my analysis (Varga-Dobai 2012, p. 4). The conclusions in this paper are partial and provisional, and demonstrate a need for systematic inquiry into the paternalistic measures enacted to "protect" vulnerable women.

I met my interviewees through contacts in the anti-trafficking sector, where I worked as a policy director for a leading NGO for two years, and the Philippine Sex Workers Collective, a loose alliance of sex workers who support the full decriminalisation of sex work. The ten women whose stories I discuss here were among fifty I interviewed between 2017-2018 for my PhD dissertation. Six identified as sex workers, a term that suggests they regard selling sexual services as a form of labour. Four identified as trafficking survivors. These self-identifications are nuanced and tricky. In a legal regime where selling sex is criminalised, or where state assistance is in practice restricted to those who identify as victims, women engaging in prostitution who are rescued may be incentivised to present themselves as victims. At the same time, some of those who identified as sex workers and rejected the label "trafficking victim" would have been less averse to being rescued if they were provided better alternatives. They, too, identified as "victims", but considered their aggressors to be the police and repressive state policies, not their clients or third parties. To further complicate categories, two of them were rescued as minors, but willingly returned to sex work as adults. Ultimately, I upheld their self-identifications but attempted to reflect the complexity of each case. All had escaped or been discharged from shelters for at least a year before our interviews. I use pseudonyms and remove identifying information when I discuss their stories and only name shelters when given explicit permission.

I asked about the circumstances that led to them being sheltered, and the shelters they stayed at and the durations; whether they were informed of the process and consulted about their situation and the interventions applied to them; whether they were told they could refuse and if they had refused rescue or shelter at any point; whether they attempted to leave or escape; whether they could communicate with people outside or leave the premises during their stay; whether they were working or earning while at the shelter; whether their dependents had sources of income during this period; the circumstances behind their release; whether they were asked for feedback on their experience; and their lives after being sheltered.

Respondents from stigmatised populations can easily "tell you what they think you want to hear" if they have concerns about privacy, confidentiality, and social judgment by the researcher (Shaver 2005, p. 297; Agustin 2004, p. 2). I reflected on how to build trust with my interviewees and address fears of judgment or fears for their safety. I was upfront about my research purpose, former involvement in anti-trafficking, and status as a researcher in a Western university. I explained that I conceived of the interview as a conversation, and that participants should feel free

to talk about other topics, interrupt me, or ask me questions. I was open to responses that were messy, potentially contradictory, and reflecting multiple subjectivities. I regularly abandoned my interview structure to allow for more free-flowing, even circuitous, conversation. I conducted my interviews in Filipino.

My interviewees stayed in safe houses or shelters that were either run by the DSWD or NGOs accredited by the DSWD, some of which are faith-based. Some shelters were designed for short-term stay until residents are discharged or placed in longer-term shelters. Women may go through several shelters during their rehabilitation period. These shelters were not always exclusively for women who had been rescued from sex trafficking. Some also housed female victims of non-sexual labour exploitation or intimate partner violence and young women “in conflict with the law”. Most had government funding and were managed by NGOs that engaged in research, lobbying, and awareness-raising and that worked with the government on prosecuting anti-trafficking cases.

Critiquing notions of empowerment

The psychosocial interventions in rehabilitation draw on a feminist practice of consciousness-raising, which MacKinnon (1989, p. 83) describes as “a collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women’s social experience, as women live through it”. She explains that women need space to uncover and analyse the impact of male dominance, including their internalisation of it, through collectively speaking about their experiences. In its ideal form, consciousness-raising takes place in a non-hierarchical setting, with an ethic of openness, honesty, and self-awareness (p. 85). In a rehabilitation program (or in any rescue context), shelter residents may be each other’s peers, but they exist in a subordinate position to social workers, counselors, lawyers, and NGO officials, who also have their own agenda. The distortive effects of these hierarchies on the rehabilitation process are explored in this paper.

The core purpose of rehabilitation is “empowerment”, defined as enhancing the capacity of women to make independent decisions and assisting them in securing resources, knowledge, and skills to function independently (PCW 2013, p. 6). Juxtaposed against my interviewees’ stories, it seems that rehabilitation has fallen short, if not undermined these goals. Their stories uncover a broader ideological project of producing moral neoliberal citizen-subjects who have exited sex work but are still responsible for their own and their families’ survival. The regulation of women’s mobility and sexuality in shelters reinforces a combination of gendered morality and individual responsibility. Despite official guidelines stipulating otherwise, my interviewees felt pressured into cooperating with law enforcement to prosecute perpetrators and believed that access to support from state agencies and NGOs was conditional on doing so. While they mostly complied with the formal and informal rules during their rehabilitation stints, they demonstrated a clear awareness of the exclusionary and exploitative dynamics of the process and a deep dissatisfaction with their rescuers. In this context, their performative cooperation with regulations is transgressive. In the next section, I introduce my interviewees and describe their initial encounters with their rescuers. I then discuss the key themes that emerged from my interviews and situate these in a broader critique of rehabilitation efforts.

Rica, 18; Alissa, 21; Merlie, 37; Christine, 38; Lydia, 34; and Sara, 38 do not identify as trafficking victims, but Rica and Alissa were rescued when they were both under 18, which legally classes them as victims at the point of rescue, since the Anti-Trafficking Law explicitly disregards

consent for minors. Both returned to sex work after being discharged from shelters and both reported overall negative experiences of their rescue and rehabilitation.

When she was 15, Rica was rescued along with other women in an entrapment operation conducted in a popular mall in Recto known as a prostitution hotspot. The “rescue” was featured in a national news program.² Her face was visible in the footage and this upset her greatly. She narrated that there were no social workers present. The police dragged them into vans with no explanation. In the TV report, two of the rescued women were asked by reporters about why they engaged in sex work, to which they said that they did not have other jobs. The third parties arrested said that they were only helping women earn and that it was the latter who asked to be introduced to clients. While only seven of the women were minors, NBI agents said in the same report that all fifteen women rescued were “trafficking victims”. Despite this, the adults were jailed while Rica and other minors were placed in a shelter. She added, “After a few months, I was freed”. She was traumatised by the experience: “I stayed home. Slept, ate, washed clothes for a living”. After a year, she returned to sex work.

Alissa was 17 when she was rescued by the NBI and International Justice Mission (IJM). She was received by a social worker who clarified, “You are not being arrested, you’re being rescued. Why do you need to do this? There are many decent jobs”. She recalled feeling shame and crying throughout. After a few days at IJM’s shelter, she was placed in a DSWD shelter for a year and eight months, and then Wipe Every Tear (WET) shelter for two months. Her young child stayed with her at WET. She did not want to stay in IJM’s shelter because they made her sew and suggested it as an alternative job. The rehabilitation process was explained to her, “But they lied. They said it would take days or weeks! I was 17 when I was rescued and 19 when I escaped!”. At WET, she made greeting cards and earned 80 cents (USD) for each card that was sold, but WET sold it for much more. She added, “They took money off my allowance for every small mistake – littering, forgetting to turn off the lights or the fan in the room, clutter, handing in my assignment late”. She repeatedly asked to leave, but was not allowed, and so one day, she did not return to the shelter after school. She met a client that same night: “I had no money. I was away from my parents. And I really did not want to sew”.

Merlie called an anti-trafficking hotline and asked to be rescued. She voluntarily entered a shelter for victims of trafficking and domestic violence in Cubao to escape her sexually abusive brother-in-law. She explained that sex work was not her problem, but the sexual abuse of her brother-in-law and her sister’s denial. At the shelter, she was taught to weave mats but barely earned from it. Residents were made to care for children without pay and forced to attend Catholic mass. She was required to give up sex work, which she could not do because she had a young child to support.

Christine, Lydia, and Sara were rescued as adults. Christine and Sara were visibly angry about their experience. Both returned to sex work after being sheltered. Christine used to pay bribes to police officers but eventually could not afford it. She suspected this was the reason she was picked up in a street raid and sent to an anti-trafficking shelter where she stayed for a month. In her words, “They did not provide me with alternative work but they did not let me leave. They wasted my time. I am sure they made money by pretending to donors that they were making my life better”. She continued, “It’s fine if we’re caught, but only if they actually help us. But we receive zero help. Even if you catch us daily, but don’t help us, we will go back to this. When I worked as a street vendor – they call this clean and decent work, right? Well, they caught me, too, because I did not have a permit”. Sara was tricked by an anti-trafficking police officer pretending

² A recording of the news segment is available on YouTube, but I have chosen not to share it.

to be a client whom she took home. He took her daughter away and turned the child over to the Jose Fabella Center, which caters to “distressed and disadvantaged individuals”. Sara had to check herself into the shelter to be reunited with her child. As it was a temporary shelter, they were released in a few days. “What was the point?”, she said. “Also, he did not pay for the sex”. Lydia was asleep on the street in Quezon Circle. Police officers poured cold water on her as they raided the street to rescue potential trafficking victims. They also took her to Jose Fabella Center. This coincided with a major political event being hosted by the government. In her words, “I was hidden for four days, and then released as if nothing happened”.

Four were trafficking survivors: Luisa, 20, was rescued by anti-trafficking police with social workers from DSWD and IJM from sexual exploitation by an older family member when she was 16. Angel, 21, was working as a domestic worker when she was 15. She was beaten and sexually exploited by her employers. She called the anti-trafficking hotline that she saw in a poster at a bus station, and was rescued by DSWD and social workers. Juana, 23 was rescued from a cybersex den when she was 15. Juana’s parents could not afford to send her to school. When she was 13, a distant relative deceived her into working in his cybersex business, which featured women performing live sex acts for a foreign audience. According to her, she was not forced to stay and could leave any time, but she wanted to save for school. After police raided the den and took her and other women to a crisis centre, Juana filed a case against her recruiters with the centre’s help. Because of threats to her life from her perpetrators, she was referred to a leading NGO with a safe house. Carmel, 23, was rescued from a bar when she was 19. Her work included dancing on stage and entertaining guests. When clients took her out, they paid the bar a fee. She received roughly 35 USD for every two hours with a client, which is three times the daily minimum wage. She was not indebted or forced to work and could leave any time. The social workers at Visayan Forum Foundation (VFF) persuaded her that she had been victimised and instructed her to file a case against the bar owner, but the case was dismissed. Carmel tentatively identified as a “survivor”. After leaving the shelter, she regularly engaged in freelance sex work and received client referrals from her friends via social media.

Different ethical worlds, similar reflections on rescue as detention

My interviewees consistently used language that conflated shelter with detention. Rica referred to her release from the shelter as “freedom”, and regularly used the words “escaped” and “got out”. Alissa described the rescue of her friends as them being “taken”. Lydia felt she was being ‘hidden’ rather than helped. Christine described her experience as being “caught”. Sara described it as being ‘trapped’. Rica and Alissa repeatedly described curfews as being *nakakulong*, which translates to “being detained or imprisoned”.

Except for Merlie, who left the shelter on her own, it was unclear to the rest how long they would have to stay in the shelter or safe house. The four who identified as trafficking victims and the two who were rescued as minors were regularly told by social workers that cooperation with law enforcement in prosecuting their perpetrators would hasten their release. Alissa reflected on the arrest of one “pimp” at the same time she was rescued: “I was specifically told, ‘You need to pin down this ‘pimp’ so you can leave or you’ll stay here for a long time’. For me, they should not have jailed her. I did not even know her! The worst part is my friends and I could not defend her. I have a child that I need to think about.”.

For the safe houses and shelters they stayed at, daily curfews ranged from 5 – 7 PM. They were only allowed out of the shelters to attend school or university, if at all. They were entitled to

one call per week and not permitted mobile phones. They had to stay in during weekends. Restrictions on their mobility were often justified as necessary to protect them from perpetrators who may harm them or get in touch with them to threaten or manipulate them. This was untrue for Sara and Christine, who were freelance sex workers, or for Luisa whose abuser died shortly after her rescue. Juana, Carmel, and Angel said that they would have not pursued charges if it was made clear to them that their lives would be further endangered, thereby extending the time they needed to stay in a safe house. Over a period of three years, Juana and Carmel, both adults, repeatedly begged their social workers to let them live independently. Under the law, they were due tuition fees and stipends. However, they were repeatedly turned down and told that access to assistance was conditional on them completing the “rehabilitation process” and that having them in a safe house made it easier to prosecute their cases. In Juana’s words, “I am the victim, but I’m the one who was locked up for years and cannot move on with my life”.

Some of my interviewees resisted rescue and demanded to be released but were ignored. The DSWD guidance on rehabilitation states that “Victims of trafficking do not readily accept offered services because of mistrust they developed after the trafficking incident” (2015, p. 9). Flores-Oebanda, director of VFF, a multi-term IACAT member, as she is cited in Linao (p. 33), says “They see us as getting in the way, that we are taking away their jobs and opportunities. Some of them even vandalise our shelters. But eventually, they appreciate it”. The eventual “submission” of these women is hardly ever interrogated and it is often concluded that they eventually realised the value of the process. This view undermines the anti-trafficking sector’s commitment to self-determination. While some forms of trauma may require psychological deprogramming processes, especially for minors, this diagnosis is usually made after a careful examination of individuals by medical professionals. Here, there seems to be an a priori assumption that sex workers as a group do not know what is in their interest, despite attempts by sex workers in the Philippines to challenge assumptions of victimhood and a thriving global sex worker rights movement.

In 2010, Gallagher and Pearson (p. 78), reported that shelter detention was overwhelmingly directed towards women and girls, often justified by the need to protect victims of trafficking from threats to their lives. Most shelter providers asserted that detention victims themselves had consented to restrictions on their freedom of movement. Others were upfront that victims were needed for prosecution and must be kept from running away. Even the 2014 US TIP report (US Department of State, p. 314) noted the absence of guidelines on freedom of movement in anti-trafficking shelters in the Philippines. Similar observations about detaining women against their will in the guise of rehabilitation have been made about IJM and the anti-trafficking sector in Thailand (Kinney 2014, pp. 154-158). Kinney observed that women’s interests were subordinated to law enforcement goals of building strong prosecutions against perpetrators. My interviewees’ experiences also show that women’s interests are subordinated to other agendas (usually criminal justice goals) in rehabilitation.

Moral regulations

Many of my interviewees were subjected to strong, often Christian, moral regulations. They were required to perform chores in their shelters, which they were told by social workers was a way of building discipline. Luisa was first sheltered at an NGO shelter for young women accredited by the DSWD. Residents had to wake up at 4:30 AM and perform chores such as cleaning the buildings and cooking. Those who failed were given penalties such as being made to stand in a corner all day or dig the compost pit. Upon graduating high school, she was transferred

by DSWD and IJM to First Love International, where she was told by social workers to break up with her boyfriend because her scholarship was covered by missionaries who forbade teenage dating. She asked to be moved because the “moral restrictions were too intense”. When she turned 18, she was moved to another well-known shelter. The house rules were restrictive. They woke up at 5 A.M. to exercise and clean the shelter. Otherwise, they were denied breakfast. They were not allowed naps. Luisa disclosed that she was not Catholic, but they instructed her to attend worship services. Additionally, she said, “Our housemother required us to pray the rosary in the evening. I did not want to, but she forced me. The first time I did not attend, she went up to my room and said, ‘I wouldn’t want you to be my child.’ I cried so hard. I felt forced to pray. We all did”.

Moral messages were often embedded in the “empowerment rhetoric” of these organisations. My interviewees were told by the social workers and counselors that selling sex destroys their dignity and that they should never allow themselves to be “used by men” this way. To reclaim their dignity, they were encouraged or required to dress modestly, avoid make-up, and use more polite language instead of street slang. They were discouraged or prohibited from having boyfriends and going on dates. Those who attempted were told by social workers that they were being “flirtatious” and “easy”. Women who had romantic relationships with each other in the shelters were counseled and instructed to break up. Some of them managed to keep their boyfriends or same-sex relationships secret. Alcohol and smoking were banned. Social media use was restricted to one hour per week. Carmel and Juana recounted being told by social workers that these regulations are necessary to “erase” bad habits they may have imbibed while in prostitution. It is worth considering whether the emphasis on isolation is as much, if not more, for moral reasons than security, to make it easier for residents to be counselled and remade into “better and more virtuous” women. Merlie, Sara, and Christine were repeatedly told that sex work was a lazy option that made them irresponsible mothers whose children would be ashamed of them. They felt guilt and humiliation but also resentment, because sex work was in fact the best way to fulfil their duty as mothers and providers. There was a “doublespeak” in how prostitution was regarded by rescuers. The premise of the rescue and rehabilitation project was that prostitution was universally victimising because it was a forced choice driven by poverty and a form of male violence against women. However, prostitution was also regularly characterised by rescuers as “easy money” and “dirty and immoral work”. Angel, who was rescued as a domestic worker, spoke about an informal distinction between women who were rescued primarily from domestic violence or labour exploitation and those rescued from prostitution. Social workers had said to her, “Don’t be like them. They are vain and stubborn. Such headaches!”. Even those who identified as trafficking victims did not escape being shamed for their proximity to prostitution. Juana was asked by the head of the anti-trafficking NGO that sheltered her about why she agreed to work in a cybersex den, “For 1500 pesos, you let someone use you?”. Carmel was told by a law enforcement agent, “We will recommend to the DSWD to get you tested because your vagina is probably filthy.” This moral judgment betrays a recognition of the agency of women who engage in sex work because it holds women responsible for their behaviour. However, this recognition represented the worst of all worlds for the rescued women: they were shamed for any indication of “choice” over their engagement in prostitution while simultaneously being required to accept their victimhood and to retroactively interpret their sexual experiences in this light rather than deferring to their own sexual knowledge.

Moral economies

Some of my interviewees were asked to produce anti-trafficking – branded merchandise and other products for sale to “ethical” consumers but were barely compensated. Juana and Carmel joked about the irony of anti-trafficking organisations engaging in labour exploitation. They were also told to move into jobs such as factory or domestic work, baking, sewing, and handicrafts. These were accompanied by spiritual and “values formation” and instructions to reclaim their dignity through “honest and decent work”, which often resulted in many rescued women working longer hours and earning far less than they did in sex work. I argue that in these processes of identity reconstitution or “moral repair”, rescued women are being subjected to what Brown (2003) describes as an “economic rationality”, and recreated as subjects whose worth and virtue as mothers is measured by their capacity for future self-care, or the ability to provide for their own needs. Ultimately, they are still held responsible for the welfare of their families, despite this being the same source of vulnerability that led their rescuers to conclude that their engagement in sex work was devoid of consent. The difference is that rescuers were less likely to problematise these low-wage and precarious alternatives as much as they did sex work, even if these alternatives conformed to gendered forms of morality such as women’s suitability for care work, or work that required docility and submission. The social workers they interacted with made it clear that state assistance was conditional on them completely exiting sex work. Under these terms, some returned to sex work because the alternatives on offer were not viable.

Some of my interviewees absolutely wanted alternatives to prostitution. Luisa, Angel, and Juana regarded their rescue and rehabilitation as transformative. All three said they will never turn to prostitution, even if it meant begging, because prostitution is immoral and would strip them of dignity. Juana regretted performing sex acts in front of paying clients. Three of them considered this to be a legacy of the rehabilitation process. Nonetheless, all three left the shelter without any “reintegration assistance” or realistic alternatives. Luisa, who was a student at the time of the interview, worked part-time to fund her studies. Angel became a religious worker, and Juana had a child and was struggling with her small business. Carmel felt worse about selling sex after she was released from the shelter because she started feeling guilt and shame from the “processing sessions” where she was told sex work dehumanises women. Nonetheless, when she gave birth a year after being discharged from the shelter, she decided her child’s quality of life was her priority, and that sex work was her best option. At the end of our interview, she winked at me and said, “So do I sound like a good girl now?”. Carmel’s case illustrates the gap between how victims’ identities are constructed by their saviours and how they viewed themselves, which can lead to feelings of guilt and shame, especially when they are discharged and find that sex work is still the most viable option for economic survival.

Transacting with rescuers

Luisa, Angel, Juana, and Carmel spent the longest time in shelters. They described an atmosphere where they were made to “feel grateful”. Carmel was afraid to criticise shelter practices because “we were dependent on them for everything”. Shelter residents were not briefed about their legal entitlements to subsidies from the government (despite financial claims made on their behalf by the NGOs involved). In some cases, they had to beg for an allowance and to be sent to school. Juana was told to work part-time as a domestic helper after school to fund her medication for a back injury. An external organisation paid for Luisa’s college tuition and stipend because her shelter managers refused. Only a fraction reached her. “Every day, I cried and begged the social

workers for my fare and to be allowed to leave for school. My classmates gave me food. I lost weight and got sick. Sometimes, I just walked to school and I went hungry.” These practices breached official guidelines for shelter management and victim protection, but the shelters continued to have their licenses renewed and receive state funding. Carmel explained, “When inspectors arrive, they make them talk to the friendliest girls. But the rest of us are also afraid to say anything – we know that NGOs have friends in government agencies”.

Luisa, speaking about her experience in a shelter run by an NGO that had an IACAT membership, revealed that residents were encouraged to share their stories with funders and guests. “Approach them and be friendly, but steer conversations in ways that allowed us to discuss our stories of victimisation”, is how Carmel described it. Luisa joked that some of their stories evolved within weeks to sound more horrific, including in their depictions of perpetrators, whom they initially represented as friends. All four said it was regularly impressed upon them that the shelter needed to secure funding to sustain their needs, and that they must give back by tugging at the hearts of donors. Those who exaggerated their stories or gave public, often scripted, speeches as “advocates”, were rewarded with stipends and speaking engagements in the Philippines and internationally. They were also allowed more social media time. My interviewees gave in to the pressure sometimes and willingly restructured their narratives to serve as effective “survivor advocates”. They noted feeling a sense of loss over their own stories, which were used in fundraising and advocacy. Even in instances when they were personally delivering their stories, they said they knew they had no control over the broader narratives or policies that were being suggested in their name. They explained that their behaviour at the shelter was part of a performance to ensure they did not get into trouble. In Juana’s words, “Exploitation is a cycle and the anti-traffickers are a part of it”.

They rejected the idea of anti-traffickers as their saviours and viewed their transformation as a self-driven personal journey. Angel said, “I consider rehabilitation to be part of my exploitation, but I was patient and I prayed regularly for guidance and did what they asked me to do. Once I finished my vocational course that they paid for, I left. Now I can say I am free”. Among those who identified as sex workers, the cynicism was even starker. Christine said, “They only sheltered us because they made money off us. They took away OUR jobs so they can have jobs as rescuers. More women, more money! Of course, we said yes to whatever they asked so we could free ourselves as quickly as possible. But I’m not grateful. They should be grateful to me”.

Conclusion

My interviewees’ experiences show that rescued women are subjected to forms of pastoral care that seek to produce certain subjectivities, including a recognition of prior victimhood that must be transcended. The emphasis on victimhood is an insistence on innocence and purity. It divides vulnerable women into two groups and regulates the sexuality and speech of both groups. Sex workers who do not conform to markers of victimhood are constructed as deviant and deserving of discipline. The only time sex workers can receive political recognition as legitimate subjects is when they are victims, bereft of agency. It also forces those who identify as victims to give an account of themselves in the simplistic language of the law to access support or respect, which means that they need to recast their complex experiences to fit the “elements of trafficking”, by demonstrating the use of force, coercion, or abuse of power or vulnerability by their recruiters. This suggests the prioritisation of criminal justice goals over the well-being of vulnerable actors, even if rebranded as rehabilitation.

The similarities between the two groups of interviewees is striking. If they were not going to be provided better alternatives, sex workers preferred to be left alone. For some, in the time they were being “processed” in a shelter, their families had to borrow from predatory lenders to survive. The structural factors behind their vulnerability were not addressed by displacing them from their best source of income yet still holding them responsible for their survival. Trafficking survivors recognised the importance of being rescued, but they were also critical of the rehabilitation process and suggested that anti-trafficking NGOs were likely to have benefited more from their victimhood instead of helping them.

Finally, there are feminist goals at stake because anti-trafficking is being wielded a women’s rights tool. It should be a cause for concern that the goal of rehabilitation has been to remake rescued women into good mothers and Christians, craft workers, cleaners, seamstresses, cooks, and factory workers – women who are bearers of traditional feminine virtues of modesty, diligence, and piety. The gendered morality that underpins these interventions is important.³ Returning to the aim of consciousness-raising as a feminist practice of reconstituting social norms, it is worth interrogating what feminist transformations are taking place and whether patriarchal structures are being dismantled in anti-trafficking rehabilitation programs.

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