

The seduction and trafficking of minors

CONJUGATIONS By [Lila Ramos Shahani](#) (philstar.com) | Updated August 17, 2015 - 12:00am



“Marie,” who recounts her ordeal with “James X” in this interview, was recently rescued from a cyber-sex den in Quezon City. **HDPRC file photo**

Last month, I visited the Visayan Forum’s Center of Hope safe house for trafficking survivors. I was there to interview three girls—ages 15, 16 and 17—who had been coerced into doing cyberporn. In the course of my lengthy conversations with them, it also became clear that they had been victims of multiple rape, sexual abuse, forced prostitution and child trafficking.

Their trafficker, “James X,” had been recruiting minors from Surigao del Sur in Mindanao, promising them lucrative marriages to foreigners, and the opportunity to live happily abroad while sending money home to their families. Instead, he lured them to a cyber-porn den in Quezon City, made them perform naked in front of the camera, raped them, made them service foreign customers—mostly Norwegian, American and Australian—and uploaded videos of them all over the internet. When he was finally nabbed by the Philippine National Police in November 2014, James had no remorse, saying that all he wanted to do was give the children a better life. Interestingly, he himself had been, among other things, a male prostitute in Saudi Arabia—a victim tragically victimizing others in turn.

“Yanna,” a 17-year-old Manobo girl, was the 11th child among 12 children. Immersed in poverty, she began working at the age of 12 as an all-around helper for one of her family’s neighbors. It had always been Yanna’s dream to visit Manila. She wanted to experience what it was like to live in the big city, to eat, dress, and study like a true-blue Manileña. When James, the cousin of her employer, offered her a “better life” in the big city, Yanna jumped at the chance, despite her parents’ objections.

“James told me I was beautiful, that foreigners would like me for my beauty,” Yanna shared. She was only in the third grade when she left with James. He gave her a full make-over, with various hair and body treatments. “He used avocado to treat my hair. He also bleached my skin because I used to be so dark. He pampered me and gave me everything. He even sent me to school,” she said.

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One month later, around midnight, James woke her up to chat online. Unfamiliar with computers, Yanna didn’t know what to do. She was surprised when suddenly James asked her to take off her clothes in front of the camera while he typed on the computer, pretending to be her. But it didn’t end there. According to Yanna, some of James’ clients would visit Manila and personally ask to meet with her. At first, she thought it would simply be dinner, only to find that she would have to service James and his clients at a nearby hotel.

“Regine” shares a similar story. She was only 16 years old and still in high school when she left her hometown. Her father is a carpenter and her mother has a small *carinderia* business. Aware of the hardships that her parents had to go through to feed and send her seven other siblings to school, Regine wanted to find ways to help.

She met James when the latter visited Surigao to find girls who wanted to meet and marry foreigners. At first, her parents didn’t approve of her leaving for Manila with a complete stranger. But James was persistent, Regine remembers. He convinced her parents that a better life awaited their daughter. Regine also assured her mother that she would send money to them every month when she got to the city.

Like Yanna, she was also pampered by James. He signed her up in an expensive gym so she could work out and tone her body. Regine thought that James was being kind to her. But it wasn’t long until James revealed his true colors: one day, he asked Regine to pose naked for a photo, which he then sent to a foreign client. Regine tried to refuse but James forced her to pose. Eventually, James won out. As she sat naked in front of the camera, James assumed her identity, chatting with several clients.

It was in Quezon City—where James had set up his cybersex den—that Regine and Yanna met “Marie,” another survivor. Marie, now 15, was living in James’ neighborhood before she was recruited. James offered her work after doing a favor for her parents.

“James gave my mother P15,000 to bailout my father, who was accused of stealing gasoline. After that, James asked me if I wanted to help my parents. To pay off my family’s debt, I agreed to work for him, not knowing exactly what the nature of the work was,” Marie recalls. But she didn’t think that what he was doing was illegal, since her mother was a good friend of James’ sibling.

One day, James asked her to come to his house for a chat session. She had never before performed online. When she arrived, he locked her in a room and forced her to sit in front of a camera naked as he typed.

But it was not only online porn. All three further revealed that they had been raped by James multiple times. They were also forced to service his many clients in different hotels.

Mired in poverty, the three girls shared several things in common: they were all supposed to be in school, were lured by the glamor of the big city, and were ignorant about the terrible perils of human trafficking.

Indeed, it is a common enough narrative in depressed rural areas—young women who don't have access to education are seduced into leaving their families to look for a better future. Sadly, not all these young girls succeed. Some of them fall into the trap of working for persons they barely know or committing to relationships they think might save them from poverty. Instead, what they encounter is contemporary slavery in its most pernicious form.

Trafficking in Persons, as defined under the law, refers to the recruiting of persons with or without the consent or knowledge of the victim for the purpose of exploitation or forced services.

Currently, James is being charged with trafficking minors, rape, child abuse and exploitation, violence against women and children, and violation of the anti-cybercrime law.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that between 60,000 to 100,000 Filipino children—and as many as 400,000 women—are trafficked each year. From 2005-2012, a total of 1,693 cases of human trafficking were officially recorded. However, only 212 traffickers have been convicted since then. Today, countless cases of human trafficking in and out of the country remain unreported.

Despite the many laws aimed at eliminating the trafficking in persons, the reality has continued for many years. The government, with the aid of NGOs, has set up a number of institutional mechanisms for the protection and support of trafficked persons—especially women and children. Stringent penalties have also been mandated for violators.

One of these laws is the Expanded Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2012. It tackles common illegal practices that perpetuate trafficking, which include child prostitution, forced labor, slavery, involuntary servitude, sex tourism, sexual exploitation, debt bondage, and pornography. Other laws enacted to prevent similar crimes are the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012, which criminalizes acts of cybersex for financial gain and online child pornography; and the Anti-Child Pornography Act of 2009.

The Philippines is no stranger to sex trafficking. Evidence of prostitution already existed as early as the Spanish colonial era. It skyrocketed during the Filipino-American War, while the practice of using comfort women during the Japanese period—where women were used as a weapon of war—was widespread. Contemporary practices of prostitution in an era of globalization, digital technologies, rampant sex tourism amid conditions of increasing income inequality and poverty incidence have meant that sex trafficking and online pornography have been frequently yoked together.

The stories of Marie, Regine, and Yanna are reminders that the Philippines still has a long way to go to achieve a society free of abuse, violence, and gender inequality. Poverty is what drove them to leave Surigao to help with their families' needs. Sexism and the commodification of women is what allowed James to think that he could do with girls' bodies as he wished.

Trafficking remains a profoundly complex issue. It entails both economic and political solutions, not merely legal ones. Only with the vigilant and sustained cooperation of various sectors of society—from the government, parents, teachers, business owners, bus drivers, port and airline authorities, and society at large—can we hope to curtail this scourge. National and local government units should work hand-in-hand to strengthen information campaigns about trafficking. School officials, especially teachers, should also work to inform our youth of the dangers of trafficking and illegal recruitment. Parents should be well-informed enough to guide their children, and to make sure that they get the education that they deserve. Laws are there to prosecute recruiters and buyers, and to prevent further acts of trafficking.

But, in the end, the problem of trafficking cannot merely be a matter of heightened policing and altered individual behavior. It is also a social problem rooted in poverty. We can only prevent it if we find ways of reforming the economic system that feeds social inequality. For it is precisely this inequality that produces the profits driving the predations of pimp and trafficker, while deepening the desperate straits that draw their victims in.