

## WHY HAS CECILIA BEEN NOMINATED?

Cecilia Flores-Oebanda has been nominated for the 2011 World's Children's Prize for her 20-year struggle against child labour and trafficking.

Cecilia herself was five when she started working, and she has made it her life's work to fight for the rights of the poorest and most vulnerable children.

Cecilia founded the organisation Visayan Forum, which has rescued tens of thousands of girls from slave labour and trafficking. They do preventative work in towns and rural areas to stop children from being exploited.

Cecilia has influenced legislation in the Philippines and the wider world to bring about better protection for children. Despite constant death threats, she doesn't give up.

Cecilia and Visayan Forum run eight halfway houses for girls all over the country, four support centres for domestic workers and one safe house, a home for those worst affected.

Since 2000, Cecilia and Visayan Forum have helped 60,000 victims of trafficking and taken several cases to court. They have trained thousands of partners to combat trafficking, including judges, prosecutors, police, travel agencies and government authorities.



 **NOMINEE** • Pages 68–87

# Cecilia Flores-Oebanda

**The phone rings in the middle of the night. A voice hisses in the darkness: “Stop getting in the way of trafficking, or we’ll kill you and your children.” But Cecilia Flores-Oebanda won’t be scared off. She is used to death threats, after many years of fighting the people who buy and sell girls into slave labour. Today, she is one of the world’s foremost advocates of ending modern-day slavery.**

“**B**ring it on!” Cecilia usually replies. “Everything in me will fight, down to my last drop of blood.”

Nothing will make her give up her dream for all children in the Philippines to have their rights fulfilled – rights to a good, safe life where they go to school and don’t have to work.

Trading in humans is the third most profitable trade in the world, after the drugs trade and the arms trade. Many people are losing money because of Cecilia’s fight.

“But they’re afraid of me now. They know that I’ll never give up,” she says.

The first time Cecilia was threatened she was afraid, mostly for her children’s sake.

“But all my children agreed that I have to keep going.”

### Locked gates

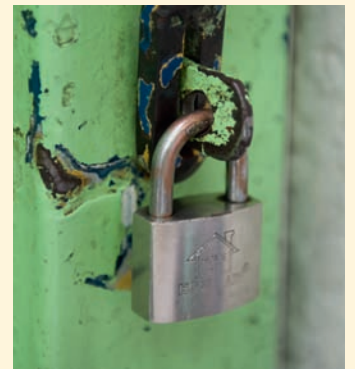
Cecilia is always on her guard on the way to work. A female security guard opens the iron gates and is careful to lock the heavy padlock once Cecilia is inside. Three young girls come running and throw themselves around Cecilia’s neck.

“Auntie Dai!” they shout, using the children’s nickname for Cecilia. “Come and play with us!”

The girls are cousins from

**Cecilia and the girls she helps are often threatened and need protection. But Cecilia is not afraid, she will never stop fighting.**

Cebu in the Visayas islands, one of the poorest parts of the Philippines. Many victims of trafficking come from there. Rosalie, 10, and her cousins have just been rescued by Cecilia’s organisation, Visayan Forum. Soon they will move to her safe house. It is a home for girls who cannot





**Rosalie, 10, and her cousins were rescued from dancing naked in front of film cameras at an internet cafe. Now they're safe at Cecilia's safe house.**

ing. It took several months for them to find us too.”

It didn't seem safe for the affected children to stay in the area. So Rosalie and her cousins were taken to Cecilia and Visayan Forum in Manila.

“But now I'm so happy. I miss my family, but my grandfather says life is better for me here, and that I need to do my best at school.”

#### **Cecilia's own story**

Cecilia's own family were



**Cecilia sold fish as a little girl to help her family survive and so that she could go to school.**



among the poorest of the poor.

“We lived between a garbage dump and a river,” she says. “I started working when I was five. My sisters and I sold the fish that my father caught in the river. I walked around in the heat with the fish basket on my head, with smelly water and fish oil running into my hair and over my face. But I knew I wasn't allowed to come home without having sold every single fish.”

“People said to us, ‘dance for us little girl, then we'll buy your wares’. So I danced and sang.”

Cecilia and her eleven siblings searched the garbage dump for things they could sell. Sometimes they didn't have time to get out the way when the garbage truck came.

“Once I ended up up to my chin in stinking garbage!”

return to their families. One girl may have been sold by her own parents, and so she would be at risk of being sold again.

“My father is dead and my mother didn't do anything to put food on the table for me and my siblings,” says Rosalie. “I lived with my grandfather.”

One of Rosalie's neighbours, Archie, was always saying that she and her cousins should stop school and work for him. Archie and his friend Stella ran an internet café and said that they needed models to make movies.

Archie said, “You could earn a lot of money.”

“I had to stop school - we didn't even have any food,” says Rosalie. “That was when my cousins and I started to work for Archie.”

Archie had promised that he would only film the girls' faces, but that was a lie.

“We had to dance naked in front of a camera. Archie said that men in other countries paid to watch us.”

Everything Rosalie did was filmed with a webcam. The film was broadcast live online for men in the USA and Australia. While the men watched the children, they sent messages to Archie saying what they wanted the girls to do in front of the camera.

The girls worked for Archie and Stella for over two years. They gave the money they earned to their families. Many other children did the same. Archie said that they weren't allowed to tell anyone what they were doing.

#### **Police raid**

One day, the internet café was surrounded by armed police. From a distance, Rosalie saw Archie and Stella being dragged into a police car. Four children came out of the house too, crying as they were taken away by the police.

“People said that we'd end up in jail because we had worked for Archie. We were terrified so we went into hid-

## **What is trafficking?**

Trading in humans is the third most profitable trade in the world, after the drugs trade and the arms trade. People can even be sold again and again, as long as someone wants to buy them. Children and adults are taken across borders or to other parts of their countries, to be exploited as forced labourers. This is called modern-day slavery. Many are exploited as maids or sex slaves. Children are kidnapped, sold, tricked or forced to do things against their will. Most of those affected come from very poor families. Traffickers control their victims through violence, blackmail and threatening to harm their victims' parents or siblings.



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**Girls who are maids in the Philippines are often treated like slaves. Many ask for help via Cecilia's 24-hour helpline.**

were planning a raid on her house. She fled to the mountains, and became known in the Philippines as Commandant Llway. Few people knew that the dreaded freedom fighter was a teenage girl. After several years' struggle with the guerillas, she was surrounded by Marcos' soldiers. She shouted: "Here is Commandant Llway. Don't shoot, I'm coming out." Some of the soldiers cut locks from her long hair as proof that they had helped capture her.

Finally, Dictator Marcos was overthrown. Millions of people took to the streets and forced him and his regime to give up.

Cecilia now wanted to give her children a better life. But she also wanted to fight for all the children in the Philippines who live in extreme poverty. With the help of her siblings, she began to set up her own organisation in Manila.

Then the area where Cecilia grew up was hit by a typhoon that killed over 10,000 people and made hundreds of thousands homeless. Cecilia discovered that ruthless traffickers were exploiting other people's bad luck. Children who had been orphaned or made homeless by the typhoon were prom-

### Helping poor children

During her time in the mountains and in prison, Cecilia had three children. The children born in prison were named Dakip (Capture) and Malaya (Freedom).

**Cecilia loves spending time singing and laughing with the girls that have been rescued by her organisation, Visayan Forum.**



### Loved school

Cecilia's mother was educated, and she made sure her children went to school. She would rather starve than not pay the children's school fees.

Cecilia got teased in school for her odd sandals, and because her hair and worn clothes always smelled of fish and garbage. The worst time was when she was a teenager.

"She's cute, but she stinks," the boys would say, holding their noses as she passed.

"Don't you know that it's a new perfume?" said Cecilia, trying to sound cool. Inside she was sad and angry. She saw that many families who didn't work half as hard as hers had plenty to eat. She decided there and then that her own children would have a better life.

Cecilia's father explained that she had to be tough to

survive in a hard world.

"He taught me to box, and he would bet on me to win matches! And he threw me in the river to teach me to swim. Soon I could swim like a fish."

Cecilia won several swimming competitions and got a place on the school swimming team. That got her a scholarship that paid for her school fees and books.

### Fighting the dictator

During Cecilia's childhood, the Philippines was ruled by a dictator, Ferdinand Marcos. She began to protest against the regime at the age of 14, even though it was very dangerous. She was angry that Marcos and his friends had a luxurious lifestyle, while the poor were starving. One day, a few years later, Cecilia found out that the military



**Many are given the chance to be children again at Cecilia's half-way houses for girls who have been sold by human traffickers.**





Cecilia has taught police and security guards at ports and airports how to recognise traffickers and girls who have fallen victim to human trafficking. They now help her to catch those who buy and sell children.

## Cooperation saves children

“Everyone must join the struggle against trafficking and child labour, or we’ll never reach our goal,” says Cecilia. At ports and airports, she cooperates with police, security guards, taxi drivers and baggage handlers. They get training from social workers and from girls who have been victims of trafficking themselves. They learn how to uncover traffickers and their young victims, they keep watch and ask questions, and they hand out flyers with Cecilia’s helpline number on them. Anyone can call the helpline to ask for help, or to report suspected trafficking.



ised jobs and schooling, but instead were sold into slavery.

As Cecilia’s work became more well-known, children began to go to her for help.

“I met girls who had fled from slave labour as maids for rich families. Some of them had scars from being burned with cigarettes or irons. One girl had been forced to drink corrosive acid and died from her injuries. She came to us

when it was too late. I realised I had to invest everything in helping these children.”

In 1991, Cecilia led the first Global March Against Child

Labour, which now unites millions of children and 114 organisations all over the world in the fight against child labour and slavery. The



## What do Cecilia and Visayan Forum do?

Cecilia and Visayan Forum believe that everyone should take part in the struggle to end child labour and trafficking. They fight all over the Philippines and they make sure those in power can’t turn a blind eye to children being bought and sold like commodities.

- Children and adults in the poorest parts of the Philippines, where the majority of trafficking victims come from, get education and support. Mothers in particular, are given knowledge to be able to protect their children.
- At ports and airports, Visayan Forum cooperates with staff, police, and other authorities, to uncover trafficking and rescue the victims.
- Rescue operations are conducted to free children who are being exploited in brothels or as maids in people’s homes.
- There are helplines open around the clock for children and adults who need help or want to

report suspected cases of trafficking or slave labour.

- Girls who have been rescued are given protection at halfway houses all over the country, help to be reunited with their families, and new confidence and faith in the future. Girls who cannot return home are given a home and an education at Cecilia’s safe house.
- Children under 14, who are not allowed to work by law in the Philippines, have their schooling paid for. Older girls get vocational training and work experience, and sometimes financial help. Former child labourers are encouraged to start local child rights clubs, where they play and have fun, but also raise awareness of trafficking, to keep their friends safe.
- To win the war against trafficking, we need better laws that protect children and make it easier to send traffickers to jail. Cecilia influences politicians in the Philippines and around the world, to make them change their laws and rules.







Children who have been rescued from child labour help Cecilia in the struggle for children's rights by protesting against human trafficking.

Global March fights for the 250 million child labourers in the world. Four million of those are Filipino children.

The hundreds of thousands of child domestic workers in families in the Philippines had no rights and were often treated like slaves. So in 1995, Cecilia founded the

Philippines' first trade union for maids, Sumapi.

Today, Cecilia's Visayan Forum is one of the world's foremost organisations in the fight against modern-day slavery and trafficking. Hundreds of staff and volunteers work with Cecilia in Manila, at her safe houses

and halfway houses all over the country, and in her preventative work in villages and slums. Cecilia is known all over the world, but she'll never forget her roots.

"I can still smell the stench of fish and garbage on my body," says Cecilia. 🌐



## Learn Filipino!

The almost 100 different ethnic groups who live on the 7 107 islands of the Philippines speak 170 different languages and dialects. The national language is Filipino. Since the Philippines used to belong to Spain, then the USA for 400 years, the language contains many Spanish and English words.

- i = Kumusta Hó
- Goodbye = Babay
- Yes = Ohó
- No = Hindi Hó
- Help! = Saklala!
- Long live! = Mabuhay!
- Friend = Kaibigan
- Group of friends = Barkada

## Cecilia's safe house

Some girls can't be reunited with their families, so they move to Cecilia's safe house, Center of Hope, at a secret address in Manila. These girls have often had death threats from the people they are running away from. They are supported by house parents, social workers, psychologists, teachers and security guards.

"It has to feel like a real home for them. They gain protection and faith in the future here," says Cecilia.

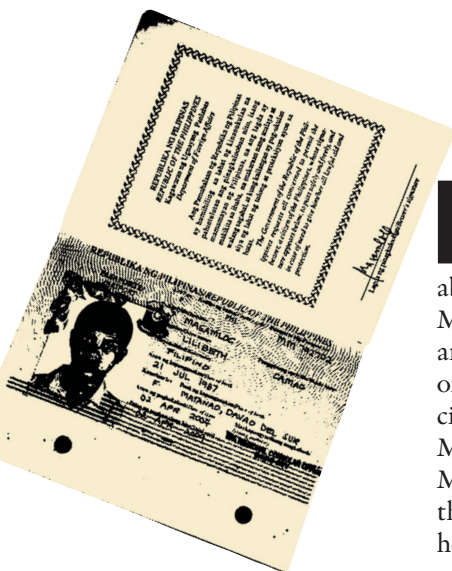
The land for the safe house was bought using a donation from J.K. Rowling, the author of the famous Harry Potter books. There are plans to build a school and a gym here.



# Samraida smuggled into slavery

Samraida was 14 when she was smuggled out of the Philippines with a fake passport. She was flown thousands of miles to work 20 hours a day, seven days a week, as a maid to a rich family in the Middle East.

“I was treated worse than an animal, and I was sold to a new employer against my will,” says Samraida.



For as long as Samraida can remember, her mother has worked abroad. Her family lives in Mindanao, one of the poorest areas in the Philippines and one that has been ravaged by civil war for over 30 years. Many poor children in Mindanao grow up without their mothers. Most families here are Muslim, so girls and

women from here are in demand as maids in rich Muslim countries, like Saudi Arabia.

“My mother only came home once every two or three years,” says Samraida. “When I was ten I asked her to stay. I cried and clung onto her, but she got angry and shouted that she worked like a slave for my sake. That night I

decided to stop missing my mother. After all, we hardly knew one another.”

Although her mother sent them money every month, the family often found themselves on the brink of starvation. Her father worked hard on the farm, but they still didn't have enough to eat. When Samraida was twelve she had to start working as a



## Jeepney to transport slave girls

The jeepney is the most common mode of transportation in the Philippines. They are always imaginatively decorated with bright colours, patterns and decorations. Jeepneys are often used to transport victims of trafficking. They are only supposed to hold 15 people, but the police have stopped jeepney buses where traffickers have packed in as many as 50 young girls. They are often covered with tarpaulin, and the traffickers tell the police and the port staff that the cargo space is full of vegetables or some other commodity.





maid. She also looked after her younger brothers and sisters and the household.

Samraida's job was tough and the pay was terrible. So she decided to go and work abroad too, even though her mother said it was awful. Overseas workers earn more, and two salaries would help the family. But Samraida was too young to get a passport - according to the law in the Philippines you have to be at least 23 to work abroad.

### Fake documents

Samraida's journey to her job in the Middle East starts when she is 14, when a man from Manila comes to her village. He's a recruitment agent, someone who recruits



The huge airport was frightening - Samraida had never flown before when she was smuggled to a life of slave labour abroad.

girls who want to work abroad. The man promises that Samraida will get a passport and a job if she goes with him.

Samraida jumps at the chance. Early one morning she sets out on the journey to Manila, with the recruitment agent and two older girls. It takes four days, travelling by jeepney and then by ferry.

"Your visas aren't ready yet," explains the man. "While you're waiting you can live with my wife and me and take care of our household."

Samraida and the other girls are kept locked up in the house, without pay. In fact, the recruitment agent says they will have to pay for bed and board.

"We'll reclaim those costs

from your salary from your first seven months in the Middle East," he says.

### Long wait

The recruitment agent gives Samraida a note of the details in her fake passport. Her age has been changed to 23 and she has a new name and place of birth. She must know all the details in case she is questioned by the airport police.

Still the weeks pass, and Samraida feels tricked and afraid. Will she have to stay here as the recruitment agent's slave? The dark room where she sleeps with the other girls feels like a prison cell. She wants to go home.

"Do what you like," says the recruitment agent. "But first you have to pay us seven months' wages, that's what

you owe us for food, accommodation and travel expenses. And you have to pay your own way home."

Samraida doesn't have any money and she doesn't know where to go.

After six months, some new girls arrive at the house, and the recruitment agent says that Samraida's visa is ready. She has a job waiting for her in Kuwait. Three days later she's on her way to the airport, dressed in a veil and a long skirt. The recruitment agent's wife has done Samraida's make-up to make her look older. A man meets Samraida in the departure hall to give her her ticket and false passport.

"Look confident. Stand tall and walk straight. And choose the second desk when



### Samraida Esmael, 18

**WANTS TO BE:** A social worker and work for Cecilia.

**IDOLS:** Singers Celine Dion and Sara Geronimo.

**LIKES:** Singing, especially traditional Philippine songs.

**LOOKS UP TO:** Cecilia, Erica and the others in Visayan Forum.







**Samraida was questioned by police when they discovered that she had a fake passport.**

you go through passport control,” says the man, before disappearing back into the crowd. Samraida’s heart is in her mouth as she approaches passport control. Her hands shake as she hands over the fake passport, but the passport control officer hardly even looks up.

“On you go,” he says.

Samraida realises that the traffickers have paid the passport control officer to let her through.

### Arrival in Kuwait

Dizzy and nauseous, Samraida staggers off the plane in Kuwait. A man is waiting in the arrival hall, holding a sign with Samraida’s false name. However, she is not taken to her workplace, but to a job

centre in Kuwait City. Samraida is locked into a small room with no windows, which is already full of girls and young women. Some are from the Philippines, others from Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Ethiopia. In the evening, Samraida and a few other girls have to stand in a row and be inspected by three men. Samraida is scared. One of the men says that he has six children and wants a girl to take care of them and the household.

“You’ll have to work from four in the morning until two in the morning, seven days a week,” he says.

Samraida does a quick calculation in her head. “That’s 22 hours a day! I can’t manage that,” she says.

The man is furious.

“You’re lazy! Why did you come here if you don’t want to work?”

Over the course of two weeks, Samraida meets a series of men with similar demands. She goes home with one of them for a trial. She has to climb a high ladder to clean a cupboard, but she loses her balance and almost falls. The man takes her back to the job centre.

“She’s not good enough,” he says.

The owner of the job centre is furious and tries to beat Samraida, but she gets away.

“Why are you trying to hurt me?” she asks. “I came here to work, not to be treated like an animal.”

When Samraida is taken back to the room, it is packed fuller than ever. New girls arrive from the airport every day, and there isn’t even space to lie down any more. Samraida has to sleep sitting up, but that is almost impossible in the heat. The room has neither windows nor a fan, and it’s difficult to breathe. Samraida realises that she’ll have to take a job, any job, just to get out of there.

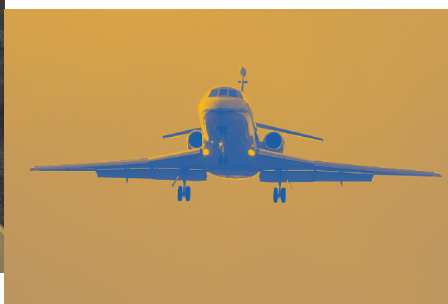
### First job

After 18 days, Samraida is hired to work as a maid for a family with four children, three of whom are grown up but still living at home. They have a large, four-storey house. An older Filipino woman does all the cooking. It’s Samraida’s job to do the cleaning and the

## Exporting people

Hardly any other country in the world has as many citizens working abroad as the Philippines. The country has a long tradition of people travelling abroad to find work, a tradition developed and encouraged by the former dictator Marcos. Almost half of the country’s 10-12 year-olds say that they have considered working abroad. Today, the country is one of the world’s most important sources of migrant workers. Some travel legally, but hundreds of thousands are smuggled out of the country and sold in neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Hong Kong, as well as the Middle East, Africa, the USA and Europe.

“Other countries export tea, coffee or electronic goods. The Philippines exports people,” says Cecilia.







laundry. Her employer explains the house rules:

“You must never leave the house - you are too young to go out on your own. You must wear a veil and you must not wear tight or revealing clothing. Don't waste time talking to the other maid, or phoning home. And you are not permitted to have any contact with our neighbours' maids.”

After the first day Samraida is exhausted. Her whole body is aching from scrubbing floors, washing dishes and doing laundry from four in the morning until midnight.

The other maid has worked for the family for seven years. She whispers a warning to Samraida, to watch out for the youngest son.

“He lies and says that the maids are stealing his things, just to get attention from his mother.”

Samraida works seven days a week, from dawn until midnight. The days drift by. The house is Samraida's prison. She wants to go home, but she has signed a contract and promised to work for the family for two years. Every month, she sends her entire salary to her family in Mindanao. They write to her to tell her about the house they are building with her money. That gives her the strength to keep going.

### Samraida escapes

After two years, Samraida is exhausted but happy. She is going home. Her contract states that her employer has to give her back her passport, and a flight ticket. But there is

a shock in store. Her employer refuses. He wants Samraida to stay on.

“Go home if you like,” he says. “But we're keeping your passport, and you won't get a ticket from us.”

The family stop paying Samraida, but they still force her to keep working. After four months, however, they are tired of her tears and her pleas to be allowed to go home. They send her back to the job centre. There, they say that Samraida has to earn the money for her ticket home, and they sell her to another family.

In the new family, Samraida has to take care of a little girl. When the girl falls ill, Samraida goes with her to hospital, and realises this is her chance to escape. She asks permission to go to the toilet, but instead she dashes down the stairs. Once out on the street, she hails a taxi.

“Take me to a police station!”

The police listen as Samraida explains she has been sold against her will.

“We'll try to help you,” they say. “You can stay here in the meantime.”

Samraida is squeezed into a prison cell with around 80 girls and women from the Philippines and many other countries. All are maids waiting for trials or to be sent home. Soon Samraida strikes up a friendship with another girl, Katy. She has run away from an employer who raped her.

“He assaulted me every time his wife left the house,”



Samraida has been given new hope for the future through Cecilia and her time at the halfway house.

she says. When Katy ran away, her employer reported her for theft. Now she is awaiting trial.

Samraida is scared. Imagine if the same thing happens to her! But after eight months in the prison cell, she finally gets her passport and a flight ticket. As she flies home, Katy is still in prison. She has been sen-

tenced to several years in prison for the alleged theft.

### Finally home

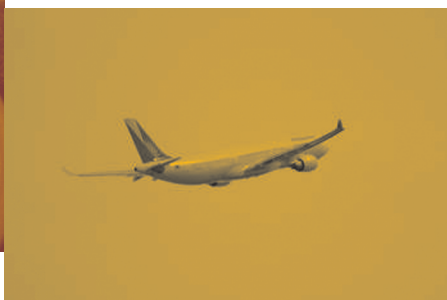
Yet another shock awaits when Samraida arrives back in Mindanao. The new house, which all her money went towards, is gone. There has been fighting between rebels and government forces in her home village. Many people



"Domestic work is decent work". Cecilia fights for the rights of maids.



Samraida is Muslim and prays several times a day.







**Samraida was kept locked in like a slave for several years. Today she is back at school and wants to work for Cecilia and Visayan Forum. She is already working to combat human trafficking, distributing information and demonstrating to support the fight against trafficking.**

have died, and her house has been burnt to the ground. Her father and siblings are living in a refugee camp. They are delighted that Samraida is home, but they cry as they tell her about what has happened.

“You didn’t even get to see your own house!” they say.

Samraida decides to go abroad again.

“I plan to earn enough money for another house.”

“Absolutely not,” says her father, upset. “You’ll have to walk or swim to Manila.” But Samraida is stubborn, and in the end her father gives in.

One evening a few weeks later, Samraida is back at the airport. But this time, the passport control officer calls the airport’s special anti-trafficking unit. They’ve been trained by Cecilia and Visayan Forum, and they know how to recognise vic-

tims of trafficking. Samraida claims she is 25, but the special unit’s dentist examines her teeth and discovers that she is under 18. Then they call Erica, one of the social workers from Visayan Forum.

#### **Protection at halfway house**

Behind high walls, near the airport, is Cecilia’s halfway house, where girls who have been rescued on their way abroad are kept safe. It is after midnight when a guard unlocks the heavy padlock on the gates. Samraida cries silently. She has missed her chance to help her family. And what if she ends up in prison for trying to travel with a false passport?

Erica takes her to a room upstairs. In the darkness, Samraida can just see rows of narrow beds, and she begins to panic. Is she back in pris-

on? But one of the girls wakes up and whispers:

“Don’t worry. You’ve come to a good place. Sleep now, and we can talk more tomorrow.”

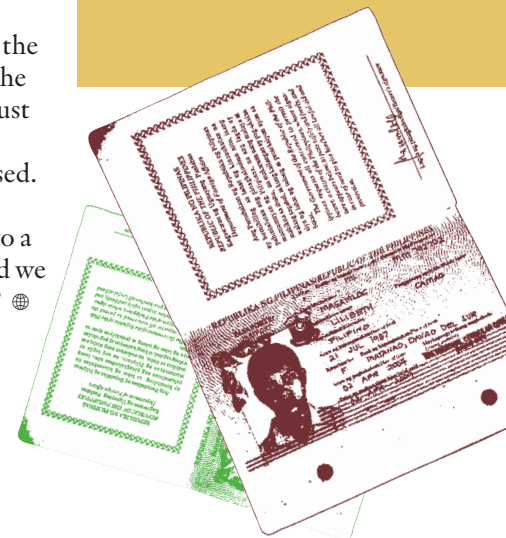
The next morning, all the girls gather round Samraida. All of them have been victims of trafficking, but have been rescued by Visayan Forum, an organisation that helps the girls to get an education and be reunited with their families.

A week later, Samraida wakes up in the middle of the night. A girl is sitting on the bed next to hers. She has just arrived from the airport, looking scared and confused.

“Don’t be afraid,” says Samraida. “You’ve come to a good place. Sleep now, and we can talk more tomorrow.” 🌐

## What is a half-way house?

Cecilia och Visayan Forum have built nine ‘halfway houses’ near Manila airport and near shipping ports that are used by traffickers. The girls who are rescued are taken straight to a halfway house for protection and immediate help. At the halfway houses there are social workers and field workers who are on hand around the clock. There is also a ‘house parent’ who makes sure that the girls get everything from food and beds to acceptance and love. Based on each girl’s individual situation, they can receive help to be reunited with their families, grants for school fees, and legal and psychological support. The halfway house staff run helplines and train airport and port staff to be able to uncover trafficking and rescue the victims.





### 6.00 Wakey wakey!

Sometimes new girls have arrived from the airport during the night. They are often sad and scared, so they need a warm welcome when the others wake up.



# A day in the life of

Near the airport is one of Cecilia's Halfway houses, a safe home for girls who have been rescued from being smuggled abroad for forced labour.



### 6.20 Morning exercise

This makes even the sleepyheads wide awake.

### 6.40 Clean and fresh

A quick wash and brush of the teeth – nobody wants to miss breakfast.



### 9.00 Hi Cecilia!

Today Cecilia is visiting. She plays games and chats with the girls. Although many of them tell her about sad experiences, there is also room for plenty of laughter.



### 7.30 Everyone helps

Everybody helps house mother Alice to make breakfast and set the table.



### 11.00 Build a shelter! The typhoon is coming!

The game Bahay, Bata, Baygo (home, child, disaster) is all about children needing protection and a safe home. The game starts when someone shouts that a typhoon is coming. Then everyone has to hurry to 'build' houses to shelter in.







**12.00 Fish for lunch**  
Krista, 16, helped to fry fish for lunch.

**13.30 Musical chairs to Lady Gaga**

Lady Gaga is booming from the speakers as the girls play musical chairs. Everyone squeals with laughter when the final chair breaks under the happy winner. She was rescued just a few days earlier, after a member of the family she worked for as a maid tried to rape her.



# the halfway house

**18.00 Christian and Muslim prayers**

The Catholic girls use a small upstairs room as a chapel, while the girls who are Muslim usually use the dormitory for their prayers.

The youngest girls can draw and write about their experiences.



**22.00 Quiet in the Halfway house**

Lights out, and all is peace and quiet. But who knows how many new girls will be rescued during the night tonight.



**20.00 Evening karaoke and letters**

In the evening lots of people gather around the TV to sing karaoke. Others take the chance to write letters home.







# Marisela tricked in

**When Marisela's father falls seriously ill she has to stop school. The family is facing starvation when she is offered a well-paid job at a restaurant in Manila. But Marisela has been lied to, and she is forced to be a slave at a brothel.**

**M**arisela is growing up in Samar, where her family have a small farm. They live in a bamboo hut surrounded by meadows, mountains and tall trees. It's a beautiful area, but a poor one. The family rarely have enough food to eat their fill. When her father falls ill, Marisela has to stop school and take a job as a maid. The pay is poor and she cries herself to sleep under her master's table every night. After

six months she returns home and begs her mother to be allowed to go back to school. But it's not possible.

A few days later, her mother's cousin Lana comes to visit. She says she can get Marisela a job at a restaurant in the capital, Manila.

"She's too young," her parents say at first, but they give in when Lana promises to take good care of Marisela.

The journey begins early the next morning. A few

other girls from the village are going too. It's the first time Marisela has left Samar, and the first time she has travelled by ferry. The high waves make her seasick, but she is full of expectation.

On the journey from the ferry terminal into Manila, tall buildings and wide streets flash past the taxi window. Neon signs and shop windows sparkle in the darkness of the night. But when the taxi stops, Marisela is disap-





# to brothel



Marisela was rescued from slave labour at a brothel and was offered protection at Cecilia's home for girls.

pointed. She sees a dirty, run-down house behind high walls.

"Where is the restaurant?" she asks.

"You must rest first," snaps Lana. She pushes the girls into the house and leaves them alone in a small room. The others soon fall asleep, curled up on the floor. But Marisela lies awake for a long time. She senses that Lana is behaving strangely, and that all is not as it should be.

## Captives at brothel

The next morning, Lana tells them the truth. There are no restaurant jobs. The girls are

to work at a brothel and sell their bodies to strange men. Marisela is shocked.

"Why didn't you tell us?" she shouts. "I would never have come with you! My mother wouldn't have agreed to it!"

Lana just walks away. When Marisela tries to follow her, the door is locked. She and the other girls run over to the window and see a guard outside the gates. They are captives at the brothel.

After a long wait, a man comes to get them and drags them in to another room. It's full of girls sitting on the floor in their underwear.

Suddenly, Marisela spots her cousins from Samar. Lana has tricked them into coming here too. One of them, Nadia, tells them that the girls are kept under lock and key 24 hours a day, and are only let out to take care of clients. The men who work at the brothel are called pimps. They guard the girls and take them to clients' hotels. Nadia feels sorry for Marisela, who is crying and saying she wants to go home.

"Lana takes all the money we earn, but sometimes the clients give us a little pocket money," says Nadia. "I've saved some up, and I can pay

for your ticket home."

But when Lana comes back she says that Marisela has to stay.

"Nadia's money won't get you far. You owe me loads of money so you have to work to pay me back. You have no choice."

One of the pimps takes Marisela to a doctor's surgery.

"Don't say a word to anyone," he warns her on the way there.

Lana wants to know whether Marisela has any illnesses and whether she is a virgin, someone who has never had sex. Later, Marisela





WELCOME A&

**Tens of thousands of girls from poor families are sold by traffickers to sex clubs and brothels in the Philippines.**

→ finds out that clients pay more for young girls who are virgins. She is the youngest at the brothel, and is worth a lot of money to the traffickers.

The doctor is suspicious. She asks lots of questions but the pimp is standing next to Mary-Ann so she doesn't dare ask for help.

Nena gives Mary-Ann a special soap and tells her to scrub herself three times a day to make her skin lighter. She also gives her a short dress and thin underwear. Mary-Ann's own clothes are ugly and childish, says Nena. Mary-Ann wraps her clothes up in a parcel. When no-one is looking, she writes a note to her mother and hides it among the clothes. Then she gives the parcel to Nena.

#### **First client**

Soon the pimp tries to take Mary-Ann to a client, but she struggles free of his grip and refuses to go. The next day the pimp is angry. He calls Mary-Ann terrible things, and shouts that she can't just eat and sleep, she has to work too. The pimp drags Mary-Ann out with him and leaves her in a hotel room. The client, a Chinese businessman, is annoyed that he has had to wait two days for his virgin. He tells her to take her clothes off and have a bath. She starts to cry and falls to her knees to beg him to leave her alone.

"It's my first time doing this, they're forcing me."

Finally, the man begins to cry too.

"I won't touch you. But don't tell your pimp," he says. "Lie down and rest."

But Mary-Ann doesn't dare lie down - she is worried that the man will attack her.

"Don't be afraid. I have daughters around your age, so that's why I'm leaving you alone," he says.

A few hours later, Mary-Ann meets the pimp in the hotel lobby.

"Did it hurt?" he asks. Mary-Ann looks down and shakes her head.

#### **Mary-Ann tries to run away**

The next day Mary-Ann is dragged to another hotel room. The client is wearing a green hospital tunic, the kind

that doctors wear. He doesn't care about Mary-Ann's tears.

"I've paid for this. Now take your clothes off and do your job," he says, forcing Mary-Ann down onto the bed. She tries to wriggle free of his grasp, but he is too heavy. She feels like she is going to suffocate.

The man rapes Mary-Ann. Then he throws her out of the







There is a small Catholic chapel at the halfway house for girls.

room. She goes down the stairs, determined to run away before the pimp returns. But when she gets to the exit the hotel staff stop her and call Lana.

That night Marisela curls up on the floor in the stuffy, windowless room and sobs tears of pain and exhaustion. Is this how her life is going to be now?

### Help is on its way

Meanwhile, in the village of Samar, Marisela's mother has found her note in the parcel of clothes. She goes straight to the police station, and they contact the police in Manila. The very next day, they hear banging on the brothel door. There are police officers and social workers outside.

"We don't have a Marisela here," says the pimp. But Marisela hears her name and calls for help.

In the car on the way to the police station the pimp hisses that she'd better keep her mouth shut.

"Otherwise you and your family will be in trouble."

Marisela gets scared. What

if Lana sends gangsters to kill her parents and siblings? She refuses to answer the police officer's questions, and the pimp is allowed to return to the brothel.

Marisela is moved to a Visayan Forum halfway house. The other girls who have been saved from trafficking welcome her, and Cecilia tells her not to be afraid - she is safe here. Then Marisela starts telling her story. That means that the police and Visayan Forum can do another rescue operation and free all the girls who are held captive at that brothel.

### Happy and free

With support from Cecilia and Visayan Forum, Marisela dares to testify against the traffickers in court.

"I want revenge," she says to Cecilia. "They stole my childhood."

Before and during the trial, Marisela and her family receive several death threats. But Marisela doesn't let herself get frightened, and her family support her.

Finally, Lana is sent to prison. But Marisela knows that other people have taken over and have already started recruiting girls for a new brothel. That's why she continues to work with Cecilia and Visayan Forum to raise awareness of trafficking and report anything suspicious.

"Almost all the families in my village have been affected in some way," she says. "Many children and women have been tricked and exploited. I warn my sisters and all the girls in the village not to talk to strangers. I say, 'Don't listen to exciting promises of good, well-paid jobs, not even from people you know.'



### Marisela, 17

**LIKES:** Writing poetry and reading.

**FAMILY:** Mother and six brothers and sisters – my father is dead.

**WANTS TO BE:** A social worker.

**IDOLS:** TV stars Kris Bernal and Aljur Abrenica.

**LOOKS UP TO:** Cecilia and the others in Visayan Forum.

After all, I was sold by my own relative!"

Marisela still wakes up often in the middle of the night from nightmares, in a cold sweat and with a pounding heart. But she is delighted to be free, and now she's back at school.

"I'm going to train as a social worker and work for Cecilia," says Marisela. "I want to be like her, and save girls from slavery and abuse." 🌐

### Marisela and her new friends fight together to combat human trafficking.





# VISAYAN FORUM FOUNDATION AND ANGELO KING FOUNDATION



## Ruby won against trafficker

**Ruby will never forget the day in court when her trafficker was sentenced to life in prison. She and Cecilia cried when the verdict was announced. It was a historical victory.**

**R**uby was 14 when she was tricked by a trafficker. She was the oldest child and lived with her family in the poor area of Mandaluyo.

“I had to stop school and start working when I was twelve. My stepfather was unemployed and drank all of our money. He beat me, and my mother shouted at me all the time. One day one of my friends said that her Aunt Nellie could get jobs for both of us at a restaurant on the coast. I saw the chance to get away from my stepfather, and my mother’s nagging. With a good salary I could send

money home to the family.”

Ruby and five other girls met at the home of the friend’s aunt.

“Nellie showed us our uniforms: short vest tops and miniskirts. She also asked if we were virgins. That made me nervous, but my friends didn’t seem worried, so I didn’t say anything. Nellie said we were going to stay at hers that night and go to the coast the next day. So I didn’t get a chance to talk to my mother. Early the next morning we took a four-hour bus journey to the ferry terminal in Batangas.”



**The shop in Ruby's area has to guard against theft!**





**Ruby's school diploma and awards. Left: Rescued girls wear masks at the opening of Cecilia's safehouse.**

### Questioned by police

Just when Nellie and the girls were about to board the ferry, a guard stopped them. He suspected that Nellie was a trafficker and called the police.

"The police officer asked how old I was," says Ruby.



### Robileen "Ruby" Acebo, 20

**WANTS TO BE:** A social worker and work for Cecilia and Visayan Forum.

**LIKES:** Dancing, but I'm too shy! Writing poetry.

**DOESN'T LIKE:** Loud noises and injustice. That girls are exploited and abused.

**LOOKS UP TO:** Cecilia. She rescued me and inspired me to save others.

"First I said 18, as Nellie had told me to. Then I said 16. 'You look more like twelve,' said the police officer. He was a big man with an angry voice. I was terrified and in the end I told the truth."

At the police station Ruby also met Chris, a social worker from Cecilia's organisation, Visayan Forum.

"Chris made me feel safe. She explained that we had been on our way to be sold to a brothel," says Ruby. "And that we had been saved at the last minute, and that Nellie would be put in jail if we would testify against her. But I didn't dare answer any more questions."

Ruby and her friends were taken to Cecilia's halfway house. The older girls were furious and wanted to get out.

"I wanted to stay really, but I didn't dare stand up to my friends. In the end we managed to escape, but the police caught us. After that I found new friends at the halfway house. I learned more about trafficking and I met girls who had been sex slaves at brothels. I realised that I was lucky to have been saved in the nick of time. Now I wanted those who had tricked me to be punished. Not just for my sake, but for my friends' sake."

### Death threats

When Ruby and another girl agreed to testify in court, they and both their families received death threats.

"Sometimes it felt hopeless and I wanted to give up," recalls Ruby. "But Cecilia and Visayan Forum gave me the support I needed to keep going. The first time I testified I was terrified. Nellie's family and friends were there, staring threateningly. Later I found out that my mother had been offered lots of money to stop me from testifying. But she refused. I was surprised, but also proud and happy that my mother

thought I was more important than the money."

### Historical verdict

Nellie was sentenced to life in jail. For the first time ever, a trafficker in the Philippines had been convicted after being caught while transporting victims.

"I was delighted, but also sad for Nellie. I had found out that she had been trafficked too, and that she had just had a child. The businessman who owned the bar we were meant to be taken to had made her recruit new girls. Now Nellie's in prison but the businessman is free. That doesn't seem fair."

Today, Ruby lives with her family again. The time she spent at the halfway house gave her faith in the future and better self-esteem. Now

she can put her foot down when her parents fight. She often speaks out about trafficking at protest meetings and supports other girls.

"Now I'm studying to become a social worker. My dream is to one day have a family and a home of my own, and to work for the Visayan Forum. That's my way of giving something back after everything they've done for me. Auntie Cecil has inspired me. She has made it possible for thousands of girls to get their lives back, and she never stops fighting for us." 🌐



### Ruby's home - the whole family shares one room!







The children's street theatre warns people about human traffickers.

# Children against trafficking

**A fire in the poor district of Pandacan destroyed the homes of over 50 families. Many children had to stop going to school and start working in order to survive. One of them was 12-year-old Dane Padel.**

Now Dane is back at school, thanks to a grant from Cecilia's child rights club in Pandacan. Dane and other children who have been saved from having to work

are now fighting for children's rights! "We do street theatre to warn children and adults about traffickers," says Dane. He and his friends have also made their own t-shirts as part of their campaign against trafficking. Dane has written 'Stop the abuses' on his t-shirt.

## Victor Reyes, 11

**LIKES:** School, especially maths.

**CHILD RIGHTS CLUB ACTIVITIES:** Acting. Likes performing and is never nervous.

**WANTS TO BE:** A police officer. I want to put all traffickers and drug dealers behind bars, to protect children. The police never come to our district.

**LOOKS UP TO:** My gran. She's one of the leaders of the Visayan Forum in our district.

**LIKES:** When we had a Halloween party.

**DOESN'T LIKE:** Fires. When I found out that the Visayan Forum helped those affected by the blaze, I joined the child rights club.



## Geronimo Garcia, 13

**CHILD RIGHTS CLUB ACTIVITIES:** Meeting friends, acting, singing, dancing. I'm a good actor. I also get help with my school fees.

**LIKES:** My gran. My mother left me with her seven years ago and never came back. My gran is almost blind so I help her with everything. We hardly have any money, so the neighbours give us food.

**DOESN'T LIKE:** When people drink alcohol, fight and shout. There are gangs here that fight each other. I try to avoid them.

**WANTS TO BE:** A fashion designer and artist. My favourite thing would be to design ballgowns.

**DREAM:** To stop the violence in my area and in my country.

**BEST EXPERIENCE:** When we visited the Enchanted Kingdom theme park. Worst: The big fire. It destroyed many people's lives.



Dane Padel

## Stay on your guard! Kert Quiambo, 12



I'm not for sale!  
Renamae Timoteo, 10



## Don't talk to strangers! Charlie Fernando, 11





# Actress Maricar

Maricar, 13, loves Cecilia's child rights club. Every day after school she meets her friends and they rehearse their anti-trafficking play.



Maricar and her family don't have their own house, just a narrow bench and a wardrobe on one of the narrow alleys in the poor area of Pandacan. Her parents sleep on the bench. Maricar and her brother usually sleep on the floor in relatives' houses.

"One day I hope we'll have a home of our own," she says. "I'd love a pretty little house with four rooms."

Maricar used to have to help her family by working, but now the child rights club helps her pay her school fees.

"My favourite thing is the drama group. We learn to dance too. We act out stories about trafficking. In one scene I play a maid who is abused by her employer and goes to the police."

## Raising awareness

Maricar has learned a lot about trafficking and the rights of the child. She raises awareness among everyone she meets: family, neighbours and schoolmates.

Maricar with her family. The narrow bench and wardrobe in the alley are their 'home'.



"I say: 'Don't be blind, look around you. If you see something suspicious, don't be passive, do something!' My mother was shocked at many of the things I told her. For example, that organised crime exists and that people buy and sell children. If traffickers try to recruit me I'll report them to the police. If they try to kidnap me I'll escape. I'm good at fighting!"

When Maricar hears that a trafficker has been given a jail sentence it makes her happy.

"But it doesn't happen often enough," she says.



# Maricar's wardrobe

Maricar keeps her clothes in a wardrobe in an alley. She and her family store their possessions here, since they don't have their own home.

## Play clothes

"These are my play clothes. They're comfortable and easy to move around in. My plastic sandals are cheap and practical. Especially during the monsoon season, when Pandacan is often flooded. I wish I could get high heels and checked ballerina pumps, but they're too expensive."

## School uniform

"We have to wear white shirts and pink trousers to school. We buy them second hand from older children who've grown out of them. Right now it's the summer holidays. I miss school and my friends there."

## Ballgowns

"I'm allowed to borrow these dresses from the child rights club when I'm going to dance Filipino dances like Tatarin and Buling-Buling. I love parties, especially the Santo Niño festival. We play and dance on the streets."

Santo Niño, the Holy Child Jesus, is the Patron Saint of Pandacan. According to legend, the area was attacked by the Spanish army in the 19th century. But the soldiers called off the attack when they saw a little boy playing in front of their canons. The inhabitants of Pandacan said it must have been the child Jesus who saved them. Since then there has been a festival every January in memory of Santo Niño.

