



The human tragedy behind human trafficking

♥ Maria's story

Every day after school, Maria sold bread by the side of the road to supplement her family's limited income. When business was slow, the 15-year-old chatted with Sofia, a 35-year-old woman who lived in the same Latin American village and often stopped by to visit. The two developed a friendship, and in 2004 Sofia made Maria an offer. She promised a high-paying job in the capital that would allow Maria to send money home and help pull her family out of poverty. Maria agreed and, at Sofia's urging, did not tell her parents she was leaving.

On the day of the trip, Sofia gave Maria a drink that made her dizzy, then unconscious. When she awoke, the two of them were in a taxi arriving at an unfamiliar restaurant in the capital. Sofia told Maria to go in and clean up, after which the taxi driver drove her and three other girls to a guesthouse. The taxi driver called them inside one after another; Maria was the last. Inside the guesthouse, the taxi driver raped her.

Stunned and broken, but feeling powerless to stop what was happening, Maria was brought back to the restaurant, where she was forced to waitress for a month until Sofia returned. At that point, Sofia claimed to be Maria's mother and collected the girl's wages, then relocated her to another restaurant in the city. There, Maria was again forced to wait on tables, but soon the servitude extended to sex with customers in a backroom. Weeks later, the cycle was repeated: Sofia arrived, claimed Maria's earnings and relocated her, this time to a dancing parlour. Suspicious of Sofia and Maria's relationship, the owner of the establishment alerted the local authorities, but they took no action. At the dancing parlour, Maria was forced to work, but was not sexually exploited.

Maria's salvation finally came when, one night, her uncle happened to visit the dancing parlour. Recognizing Maria, he informed her parents, who sought assistance from a human rights association. Staff from the association freed Maria and filed a criminal suit against the perpetrators in a provincial court. In December 2005, Sofia was sentenced to 10 years in prison and fined approximately US\$ 250, which Maria received as compensation. The taxi driver was not convicted. Despite Maria's testimony, the investigating judge dropped the charges against him because Sofia and Maria made contradictory statements and Maria was unable to locate the guesthouse where she was raped. The judge made no attempt to summon witnesses from the guesthouse or restaurant.



♥ Peter and Kevin's story

Peter (25) and Kevin (19), both citizens of a northern EU country, were homeless and unemployed when they were approached by Edgar. Edgar offered them a construction job, including room and board. The idea of a job and a place to stay seemed heaven-sent, and they quickly agreed. The wages were low but steady, and more than they could hope for in their current situation. Edgar put Kevin and Peter up in an old caravan with two other men and set them to work on construction jobs.

He paid them a bit of cash at the end of each day and brought them food as well. After a short while he asked if they would like to go work in a couple of wealthy neighbouring countries where there were many construction jobs on offer. Kevin and Peter agreed, as did the other men in the caravan, one of whom was a minor: Jim, a 17-year-old runaway. Kevin and Jim did not have passports, but that did not matter; Edgar got them each a fake one and bought their tickets.

Things did not work out in the new countries the way the men had imagined. Again living in cramped caravans, sometimes six of them together, their "wages" soon shrank to the point where they were earning less in a day than they should have been earning per hour. They were working long days – sometimes 12 to 14 hours – six days a week, laying asphalt and doing stonework around private houses. Whenever they were not working, they had to go door-to-door in residential neighbourhoods, trying to drum up new business. Edgar shipped them around so much that they had no idea where they were or even which country they were in. He often treated them abusively, shouting at them, hitting them, and even striking them with a spade. He warned that if they left they would be fetched back or beaten. Kevin tried it anyway, once, but was quickly found by Edgar and hauled back to the building site. He did not try again.

After three months, Edgar suddenly went back home, leaving the men behind. Kevin walked all the way to his national embassy in the capital city and appealed for help. Jim also tried to walk and was found by the police and handed over to child protection services. Peter made it to a port city and tried to buy a ticket home but was in such a confused condition he had to be helped by police; who opened an investigation into Edgar's activities when they heard his story.

In the end, Edgar was convicted of human trafficking for purposes of forced labour. Though all the men had consented to work for him and to go abroad, the court deemed that their labour had been exploited and that they had been in reasonable fear of reprisal had they tried to leave their jobs. The fact that they had little money, were dependent on Edgar for room and board, had a limited ability to make themselves understood, no real idea of where they were and, in two cases, false papers, all made any escape from their circumstances much more difficult.



Edgar received a two-year prison sentence. The money he had made from the building jobs was confiscated and he was requested to pay limited damages to Peter and Kevin worth about 10 days' wages. Kevin now lives under a form of police protection in his home country; Peter stayed in the host country in a secret location and is now under a witness protection regime.

♥ Adenike's story

Adenike was fifteen years old and working as a hairdresser in West Africa. She was befriended by a man a few years older than herself who persuaded her to go to Europe with him, where he told her that hairdressers could earn fifty times as much as she made at home. They did not get far – in a city in a neighbouring country, her “boyfriend” induced her to work as a street prostitute to raise cash for their trip. After a stay there, they began the difficult trip across the desert to a bordering town full of would-be migrants like Adenike.

After crossing the border, Adenike's “boyfriend” – in fact, her exploiter - again claimed they were short of money for the onward journey to Europe. This time he left Adenike in the care of a migration broker while he returned to their home country – so he claimed – to raise more money. Initially Adenike suspected nothing, but when she tried to leave the broker's lodge she was seized and thoroughly beaten for “breaking the rules”.

It was then that Adenike learned that her exploiter had in fact sold her to the broker and that she would have to pay the impossible sum of US\$ 5,000 for her freedom – her “purchase price” plus the costs she had incurred while at the broker's camp. She was told that she – like the other 20 to 30 girls in the broker's custody – would have to work as a prostitute to pay off her so-called debt and buy her freedom.

While held by the broker, Adenike was repeatedly abused, raped and forced to serve as a prostitute; usually her clients used no condoms. She longed to return home, yet was ashamed by what had happened to her. Eventually she managed to secretly telephone her younger sister and relate her predicament; her sister in turn alerted the police in her home town. When official attempts to rescue Adenike failed, Adenike's father scraped up the money demanded by the broker and purchased her freedom. Adenike's exploiter was arrested and charged after several weeks of surveillance, but was acquitted on the grounds that it could not be proved beyond reasonable doubt that Adenike had been sold.

In the time it has taken you to read these 3 stories, as many as twelve children across the globe have been trafficked – for sex.