

Healing and Jobs

ICT training for survivors of human trafficking at the
Philippine's Visayan Forum Foundation

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Evidence Narratives at the Center for Information & Society

The ICTD field is filled with individual success stories extolling the benefits of ICT access and fluency. These stories are often highly influential because they are rhetorically powerful, memorable narratives that create lasting frames to contextualize and interpret other data. Unfortunately, they are often driven by the demands of public relations as opposed to rigorous analysis.

When the goal is to share the story of a super star and tug heart strings, important details can be omitted. To understand how ICT programs work for *typical* trainees, to spread narratives that illuminate deeper dynamics and to amplify broadly useful lessons, stories should be researched and constructed with intention and rigor.

CIS is developing a methodology and story series that attempts to tap the rhetorical and qualitative explanatory power of detailed, contextualized, and personalized ICT case studies. While tension may sometimes exist between an organization's desire to feature certain cases and the critical researcher's commitment to rigor, a methodology built on intensive questioning and storytelling rich in the right details can uncover and communicate evidence of successful programs.

By crafting exemplary stories, by developing and disseminating useful methodological tools and by promoting these techniques among NGO managers and grant makers, CIS aims to shape a research framework that can fulfill the needs of NGOs and donors with stories that accurately represent realities in underserved communities. Properly constructed, evidence-based stories can serve the ends of rigorous analysis while publicizing good work.

This paper is an example and an experiment in this methodological landscape. It is supported in large part by a grant from Microsoft Community Affairs.

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"It smells bad, but it's so delicious!" exclaims Luce, fondly recalling the taste of durian, the infamous fruit from her home province of Davao del Sur. It's been more than a decade since Luce lived there as a four-year-old girl, but the smell evokes a powerful emotional memory. Durian, notorious for its pungent smell and sweet taste, is a lot like the stories of the trafficking survivors who now live under the care of Visayan Forum Foundation (VFF), scarred by trauma and inspired by hope.

Luce is one of fifteen young women, aged 14 to 18 years, currently living, learning, healing and now gaining ICT skills at VFF's headquarters in Cubao, Metro Manila. In addition to daily computer training courses, Luce and other residents can be found in classrooms, learning to sew bags they hope to eventually sell, or in the kitchen preparing meals of adobo and rice for each other. They are a learning community. VFF's holistic treatment program has incorporated ICT to promote psychological healing via community building and self-expression, job training and social inclusion.



Migrant labor and the risk of human trafficking

Luce has not seen her family since she left her home province. She is not certain how she was separated, but she knows that around the age of four she was passed to Davao City, then to General Santos, and then trafficked to Manila where she was recruited under false pretenses as a domestic cook. Just over a year ago VFF's network of local law enforcement and other front line interceptors who are vigilant for "red flags" found her. Luce was working from 4am to midnight without pay. Physical abuse was a daily reality until VFF coordinated a legal intervention. Her experience is typical of those, like her, living at the VFF safe house.

Women and children are particularly vulnerable to traffickers and abusive employers in the Philippine's highly mobile workforce. Visayan Forum Foundation, VFF, has incorporated ICT training to promote psychological healing and job skills for survivors of trafficking.

Migration for work in the Philippines is a common reality. The combination of minimal rural opportunities and many stories of people that have migrated and found employment drives people to the cities. The culture is intertwined with mobility, however low social status, lack of education, and few reliable information sources leave workers vulnerable to abuse and exploitation from unscrupulous employers and human traffickers. Criminal networks prey on these populations. In the words of one anti-trafficking advocate: "The people moving to the city looking for work take what they can get. Like anyone visiting a strange new place, they need help. They need guides. And traffickers oblige, using trickery, coercion

VFF is a prominent anti-trafficking advocate and resource that is using ICT to provide information and develop hard skills to protect workers.



Luce is using the computers and technology tools at VFF as part of a three part, overlapping after-care model in which ICT training complements life skills and social entrepreneurship.

ICT training complements life skills and social entrepreneurship.

Step-UP training builds technical skills and unlocks indirect rehabilitation benefits, such as personal expression, building community and inspiring new visions of work and life opportunities. The curriculum is comprised of 8 modules with general lessons, such as mousing, and particular applications, such as Internet Explorer. The course of study generally takes six months to complete, but each individual works at her own pace, creating a portfolio. The training culminates with a Step-UP certificate of completion. While Step-UP may produce economic benefits, especially for young women for whom training might lead to more advanced education, it also seems to facilitate short-term therapeutic benefits, including self-expression and community building.

Rehabilitation, self-expression and community building

Relevant curriculum makes Step-UP classes engaging and popular. Marichel, a VFF social worker, notes, "Willingness to share stories depends on the individual. Some are able to verbalize it or discuss. Some, especially those who have not yet overcome their experiences are very hesitant to talk." However, for young women who are ready, Step-UP provides a platform for sharing stories while practicing valuable skills. "It is up to each girl how much they want to share," Marichel continues. "She's encouraged to write a biography, and if she chooses to do so, it's shooting two birds with one stone. She practices computer skills and talks about herself." Talking about their experiences is an important therapeutic step that ICT training facilitates.

Five months ago, Luce began taking Step-UP classes for two hours per day on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

and deception to capitalize on the migrants' desperation. That's how they make their money." They promise jobs. But these jobs often entail exploitation, violence, poor working conditions and little hope for improvement.

Using technology to support women and children

VFF, a prominent anti-trafficking organization, recognized that after-care services for survivors represented an important gap in their overall programming. They also recognized a desire among participants to attend computer classes and began developing an ICT strategy to advance their rehabilitation and social participation goals for those living at their facility. Under a grant from Microsoft Community Affairs, VFF began Step-UP, which stands for Stop Trafficking and Exploitation of People through Unlimited Potential. It is an ICT training program as part of a three prong, overlapping after-care model, in which



Luce and the rest of her barkada, smiling and expressive, are a rare community of trafficking survivors. ICT is used to facilitate self-expression and community building—key stepping stones on the path to rehabilitation. (Note, the above picture has been altered to protect the identities of the young women.)

Like many of her VFF peers, Luce now knows how to use Microsoft Word and Excel. She can navigate the Internet. But Movie Maker is her clear favorite. She uses it to display photos of her barkada, or group of friends. She flips through the photo slide show, smiling broadly, naming the other girls and explaining the training they were undergoing that day. For Luce and others, making movies is a favorite lesson because it serves personal ends: they practice technical skills while strengthening their sense of self and community. Their pictures and narratives express their sense of friendship and community. They create movies, share them, laugh together, and then do it again. “One thing being promoted

is being one community. You have the commonality of experiences and cases, so it’s very important that they have a sense of belonging. It’s very important to get strength and be inspired by fellows here,” says a VFF staff member.

Workplace skills and economic opportunity

Students also perceive that computer literacy and the confidence derived from learning is valuable for jobs. Although Luce is no longer enrolled in school, successfully developing ICT skills is building her confidence. According to Luce “our society is now very high tech, even if you don’t finish high school, if you know computers, you can still have a job, have many opportunities.” Since landing a computer-specific job requires a number of skills in addition to technical competence, Luce’s comment may be overly optimistic. Perhaps, concedes Genaro, a VFF IT officer and instructor, however “technology training is a real asset. Many jobs list computer skills as prerequisite or preferred.” In a tight job market, where realistic aspirations include work as a cashier or shop worker, “computer literacy may provide an important edge.”

Accreditation also strengthens employability. One former Step-UP graduate reportedly returned to her home province in Camarines Norte in August 2007 and found an administrative job at a local

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A VFF staff member on the role of pictures, movies and self-expression in community building and rehabilitation

school. According to Marichel, a VFF staff member who occasionally corresponds with her, “the certificate has been quite helpful since every time she applies she shows her credentials and the employers are impressed by her since it is Microsoft.” She has been working at the school for a few months, and is also looking for a new, better paying job as a sales clerk where she will use computer skills for inventory and bookkeeping. VFF administrators believe the certificate carries weight. According to program coordinator, Julio Flauta, “the learner’s certificate is a great opportunity since it’s not just the VFF logo but also Microsoft and, in the case of NGO partners, the Bishop. It increases the program’s credibility and provides big leverage.” In a culture that heavily embraces the Catholic Church as well as many American brands, it is considered quite a coup to have the Church, Microsoft and VFF endorse the trainee.



Julio Flauta, on the benefits of being “certified” by VFF, Microsoft and the Catholic Church: “The learner’s certificate is a great opportunity since it’s not just the VFF logo but also Microsoft and, in the case of NGO partners, the Bishop. It increases the program’s credibility and provides big leverage.”

Success is marked by self-worth

For these trafficking survivors, success is achieved by enabling an individual to see herself as whole, human, and valued. The decision to learn, to attend school, even to make art is an accomplishment because it indicates that she considers herself worthwhile. In the words of a staff member, VFF recognizes that “technology is here to stay. We should be ready for that. Our role is to give a chance to those who have none.” Computer literacy helps the young women of VFF gain confidence and imagine a reality where they have a productive, valued role. According to Marichel, “Trafficking is very related to wanting to earn an income, Step-UP provides hope, offering different opportunities than they previously imagined for work—before most of them didn’t see options in life.”

Experience with Step-UP and VFF’s larger programs have even led some girls to enroll in formal schooling. For inspired fourteen year olds, belief that they can succeed opens many doors. Marichel describes the case of Rachelle, another trafficking survivor: “We are quite proud of her. She has

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VFF staff member Marichel, on Rachelle, a VFF trainee who is now in her second year of formal electronics courses

improved a lot in terms of maturing and having hope in life. When she arrived here, she didn’t know what to dream about, since Step-UP she has become quite inspired, and her potential was seen.” Rachelle is now enrolled in TESDA (technical education training) and is an IT trainer at VFF. She is in her second year of non-formal high school where she is currently taking courses in electronics. Because of Step-UP, she is interested in pursuing computer repair. Without these courses she

would not have these dreams.

The Philippines, the texting capital of the world, is rapidly and unevenly developing as an information society. The proliferation of cellular phones, Internet cafés, and online government and financial transactions has cultivated an acute awareness of the importance of access among the digitally dispossessed. In this context, ICT training is powerful symbolically. VFF's ICT program embodies participation and inclusion in modern society. Luce and other trafficking survivors at VFF have seen a brutal side of life. They have endured hardship disproportionate to their years. However, because they are young, successful interventions translate into a lifetime of benefits. Luce is only six months into her training, however, like the other young women at VFF, her confidence seems to be growing. While ICT training is only one component in their overall treatment, and an organizational experiment that has yet to answer daunting sustainability questions, it seems to encourage expression, boost self-esteem and teach valuable work skills. All the while inspiring new dreams for young women.

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