Protection, Options and Advantages
ICT training to improve economic livelihoods and reduce exploitation among Filipina domestic workers

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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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Domestic workers in the Philippines typically work 7 days per week, with a few hours of free time on Saturday or Sunday afternoon, depending on the employer. During this window, women that look older than their years gather by the hundreds in public squares like Rizal Park in Metro Manila. They cluster around the edges, quietly talking and seeking some of the social camaraderie they forfeited when they left their home provinces in search of a better life in the city. This community of domestic workers is at risk—at risk that they will lose their jobs, be abused behind closed doors in their employers' homes, fall victim to the bait and switch tactics of human traffickers, or simply lag further behind in a globalizing economy where uneducated migrant women face long odds.

Circling amidst these clusters are other women, talking a little louder, and handing out simple, colorful flyers describing free computer training on Saturday and Sunday afternoons at the Visayan Forum Foundation (VFF). VFF is a well-known and trusted advocate for workers, especially women and girls.

VFF's free computer classes attract participants, expanding the community and reaching more women with useful services and information. Although the classes are free, committing even a few hours per week to learn an alien technology is a struggle. Still, the draw of knowledge and access to ICTs is powerful. For some it may mean a more prominent role in their employer's household. Others see it as an opportunity to improve their skills and find a better job. For nearly everyone, gaining experience with computers, a powerful symbol of inclusion in modern society, itself is perceived as a step up the ladder of social mobility.

ICT training is a powerful symbol of social inclusion and participation that is perceived as a step up the ladder of social mobility. Domestic workers come to the Visayan Forum Foundation, VFF, to learn about computers. While there, they gain access to many other services that promote their well being and rights.

Today is the first day of computer training for Marielle, age twenty-four. She heard about the class through her friend Nina, a *kasam buhay*, or domestic worker, who attends SUMAPI trainings every Saturday and Sunday from 2-5pm. SUMAPI is VFF's outreach program for domestic workers. Conditioned by her workplace to be invisible, Marielle barely speaks louder than a whisper. Behind childish embarrassment and shyness, she is determined to live a better life. Finding her way to a computer class in her limited free time is evidence of this determination.

Migration, Exploitation and Worker Protection in the Philippines

At the age of 16 Marielle left the security of her family in search of the promise of the big city. This is standard practice in the Philippines today, where scarce rural jobs and plentiful examples of people who have left home and successfully found employment combine to drive people to the cities. Remittances are proof that migration is a viable strategy to make ends meet.

Migrant workers within the agricultural, domestic, and service sectors enter into situations ripe for exploitation from coercive employers and human traffickers. In the hazy moral landscape, where a large surplus of low skill workers face desperate circumstances and are unaware of their rights or unable to assert them, employers hold all the cards. Wages are low and notions of what constitutes fair treatment are murky. According to Marielle's friend Nina, she "has a good job, even though there is not enough

money for food." Unscrupulous employers and middlemen exploit this dynamic. VFF is a prominent anti-trafficking advocate and resource that is using ICT to provide information and develop hard skills to protect workers.

Domestic workers practice editing and formatting documents using Microsoft Word. The classes build technical skills while promoting knowledge to protect them from traffickers. Attending ICT training, during their few free hours per week is evidence of the value they place on it.

Scarce time, computer skills and rights education

The scheduled instructor has not yet arrived. Marielle and Nina arrived early, joined by two other domestic workers. They intently surf around Microsoft Word, the program they will learn today. The young women feel lucky to be here -- they could not otherwise afford a class like this. Marielle feels fortunate to have Saturday afternoons free, unlike many of her counterparts. Nina also feels lucky to have a few hours off on the weekend; every other day she works from 5:30am to 10pm.

Mentored by an older SUMAPI volunteer and an experienced VFF trainee, the room is silent with concentration, save for clicking keyboards. There are seven computers in this lab. About thirty people will stop in for computer time, in addition to other VFF activities and services. Occasionally, Nina, who has attended classes for two months, leans over to check on Marielle's progress, offering help and celebratory giggles to mark accomplishments on reformatting margins and perfectly replicated paragraphs about the rights of domestic workers.

VFF's ICT curriculum reinforces non-technical organizational goals, namely educating workers about their rights and techniques to protect themselves. Today students practice reading, formatting and editing text that describes ways that workers are deceived—cases of how workers are trapped, questions to ask employers and resources should they find themselves in a bad situation. The courses raise awareness. "I didn't realize I was trafficked until after I took this class," reported one computer trainee. They learn how to protect themselves while building technical skills.

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>
> *A VFF trainee, on the consciousness raising that occurs while building ICT skills*

ICT Skills Training at VFF

In 2007 VFF added ICT training to their comprehensive prevention strategy to combat trafficking and promote worker rights, recognizing the growing importance of digital access. The proliferation of cellular phones, texting and Internet cafes have increased the visibility of ICTs across the social spectrum. In the Philippines especially, government services and financial transactions are increasingly moving online. Marginalized workers that don't have access are acutely aware that they lack it.

VFF began providing ICT training to domestic workers through a program supported by Microsoft Community Affairs, with the trainings directed especially at women and girls who are most at risk of ending up in coercive labor environments. The curriculum focuses on general lessons, such as mousing, and particular programs, such as Internet Explorer. The trainings are voluntary and are individual-driven allowing progress through courses as the trainee's schedule allows. The courses are complemented by "leadership training" that, in the words of one trainee, "improves self and enhances knowledge about how to be a good leader and follower." According to Joyce, who organizes outreach for SUMAPI, the new ICT training program "not only teaches computer skills but life skills to improve themselves, their capacity, and to boost personality." The training culminates with a certificate of completion, which confers special status because VFF, Microsoft and the Bishop endorse it.

Genaro, a VFF administrator, notes that in a tight labor market, "many jobs require knowledge of computers. Training can make a difference."

"Many jobs now require basic computer skills…"

Students dedicating weekend afternoons however are not generally coming to educate themselves about the rights of workers. They believe ICT skills will benefit them socially and economically. According to Nina, access to this type of training is highly desirable and expensive: "Many classes are available, but they cost about 1,000 Pesos," more than $20USD for one month. Nina captures the sentiments of a number of trainees, "many jobs now require basic computer skills." It's difficult to know how much of an impact ICT training actually has on the employability of domestic workers. VFF trainees believe that computer literacy is a valuable skill for their livelihoods and future job prospects. Trainers note that employment announcements consistently cite computer skills as a job requirement, and while getting a job requires the presence of many qualities besides ICT fluency, they say e-skills are often a must.

Five months after inception, a few in the initial SUMAPI training cohort are beginning to complete their curriculum portfolios. VFF hopes that computer training has broadened their skill sets as domestic workers, so they perceive themselves to be more competent and valuable. Some trainees suggest that they will be more productive because the households where they work are using technology more. They will be ready to take on more responsibility, such as tracking household finances and banking. Marielle hopes one day she will have options other than domestic work—perhaps a computer job at one of the many popular Internet cafés in the area. Additionally, VFF is building partnerships with local and city government to increase future job placement. One in five jobs in the Philippines are government jobs. With luck, establishing positive relationships between VFF and government offices will help graduates gain credibility and an advantage for future openings.

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"I will be back next week"

For Nina and Marielle, the expectation that they will find a computer job is low. They understand that the few hours per week they can devote to learning will not yield radical gains. However they acknowledge the growing technology market and hope that one day a job related to computers might emerge, though they don't know how it might happen.

Short of that, improvements in their sense of self, thanks to ICT training are palpable. They attend the classes because they believe ICT training has improved their lives. SUMAPI emphasizes social entrepreneurship and applying technology skills in unconventional ways that indirectly benefit confidence and status. Learning about computers, participating in the information society is climbing the social ladder. And with each step they gain insight into dealing with shady employers and protecting their rights. Women are drawn to these classes because ICT is a powerful symbol. It is an expression of participation and inclusion in the information society.

> *Learning about computers, participating in the information society **is** climbing the social ladder. And with each step they gain insight into dealing with shady employers and protecting their rights.*

While there are many unanswered questions regarding the sustainability of programs such as these, as well as quantifiable economic benefits, ICT is undeniably popular among the women congregating in Rizal Park. Despite her tiny reserve of free time, Marielle says she will spend it at VFF. She sees value in gaining ICT skills, and being part of the supportive SUMAPI community. "I will be back next week," she says.

AUTHORS

Noelle Huskins is a researcher at the University of Washington. Her current work is centered on labor and human trafficking, particularly in the Philippines. She recently accepted a fellowship to build the capacity of microfinance initiatives in rural communities throughout Karnataka, India and hopes to continue to explore the integration of technology and social inclusion. She will receive an MPA and Certificate in International Policy and Management from the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington in June 2008.

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