

'Trafficked' identities as a barrier to community reintegration: Five stories of women re-building lives and resisting categorisation

May 2010, Thailand

Feminist Participatory Action Research

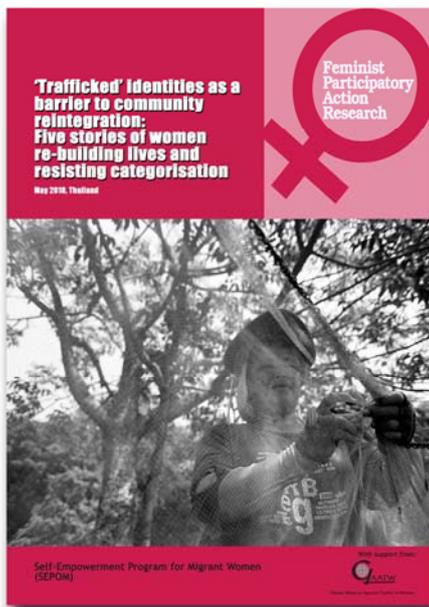


Self-Empowerment Program for Migrant Women (SEPOM)

With support from:



Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women



Women know their lives best! They know their strengths. They know what they want changed. In Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), women research the issues that affect their own lives in order to bring about needed change. As a community, they analyse their stories and talk about what actions they will take and what needs to be changed. As opposed to traditional research, women are active participants in the research process; they are not ‘researched on’.

FPAR requires a certain attitude - one that believes women can steer change; one that embraces and values the complexity of women’s lived experiences; and one that highlights the strength and resourcefulness of women in the face of disempowering and discriminatory circumstances.

This FPAR initiative follows an FPAR process facilitated by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) in 1999 and 2000 which worked with several groups to explore what trafficking was and how it manifests in women’s lives. Ten years on, GAATW and like-minded anti-trafficking advocates have come to the FPAR process again, this time looking at how trafficking is connected to broader parts of women’s lives - to their experiences of gender, migration and their work.

GAATW conducted a methodology learning workshop with NGOs and Self-Organised Groups (or groups led by members of the target group themselves) in the Americas, Africa, Europe and Asia in 2009. Researchers went back to their communities, or to the communities they work with, and acted as catalysts for the FPAR process. Research groups included: the Federation of Women Lawyers in Kenya (FIDA-Kenya); Legal Resources Center - Untul Keadilan Jender Dan Hak Asasi Manusia (LRC-KJHAM) in Indonesia; Asosiasi Tenaga Kerja Indonesia-Jakarta or the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers (ATKI-Jakarta); Self-Empowerment Program for Migrant Women (SEPOM) in Thailand; RESPECT Netherlands together with TRUSTED Migrants and the Commission for Filipino Migrant Workers in the Netherlands; Researchers Noushin K and Fereshteh in Canada; Akina Dada wa Africa (AkiDWA) in Ireland, La Strada Moldova; Movimiento De Mujeres Unidas (Modemu) in the Dominican Republic; Sociedade De Defesa Dos Direitos Sexuais Na Amazônia (Sodireitos) in Brazil; and Centro de Apoyo Aquelarre (CEAPA) in the Dominican Republic.

At the end of this FPAR process one Self-Organised Group said: ‘This is a feminist process’. The anti-trafficking sector has often been accused of determining what’s best for women ‘for their own good’. This initiative seeks to counteract that idea by documenting how women are steering change in their communities. We are proud to share their knowledge and their stories of resilience, hope and strength.

Table of contents

Executive summary	4
Background	4
Findings	4
Action Plans.....	6
About SEPOM	6
Ku-Larp’s Story	7
Early family responsibilities	7
Trafficked in Japan	7
A new family	7
Starting again	8
Trafficked person’s perspective on how to best support victims of trafficking	8
Bee’s story	10
Becoming the breadwinner.....	10
Escaping a brothel to work independently.....	10
Escaping exploitation in Japan.....	11
Finding an alternative livelihood in Japan	11
Difficulties upon return to Thailand.....	11
Strength in the face of discrimination	12
Celebrating her strength and generosity	12
Helping others	13
Sri’s story	14
Parental illness and death	14
Trafficked in Thailand, Malaysia, and Japan	14
Escaping to a new life.....	14
Returning to Thailand	15
Resisting stigma and building a new identity.....	15
Reconciling her past with her children.....	16
Som’s story.....	17
Working at an early age.....	17
Trafficked in Thailand and Japan	17
Escape and a new family.....	18
Returning home	18
Her children’s future	18
Dork-Mai’s story	20
Her family	20
Becoming an economic provider	20
“Better than going back to poverty”	21
Working for the community and future plans.....	22

Executive summary

Background

Self-Empowerment Program for Migrant Women (SEPOM) with support from the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) has conducted a feminist participatory action research (FPAR) on reintegration issues of former trafficked women from Thailand.

The objectives of this FPAR were: (1) to document women's perspectives of empowerment and agency in each stage of their lives (including when they were trafficked); (2) to document the challenges that trafficked women face upon returning to their communities and how they continue with their journey; (3) to document women's stories which highlight their strength; (4) to share stories of women's strengths and experiences with other women.

Stories were collected between December 2009 and February 2010 using in-depth individual interviews, focus group discussions, and storytelling. Returnee migrant and trafficked women interviewed other returnee migrant and trafficked women. Seven women were contacted to participate in the FPAR but only 5 women were able to actively participate. The research team is composed of 2 SEPOM volunteers who are new to research methods and have a basic literacy level, 1 staff who provided support to the volunteers, and a GAATW colleague who provided guidance and training on the FPAR process.

Findings

SEPOM's FPAR research focused on how women felt about their lives after migration and/or after being trafficked. Although they have returned back home after several years or a decade, these women continue to be stigmatised in their community because of their past experiences. Common perceptions in local communities about women who had returned after migrating or having been trafficked (i.e. 'returnee women') were often linked to being victims of trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation. Being perceived as a person who had been trafficked for sexual exploitation proved to be an enormous obstacle in reintegrating back to their families and community.

In the five stories included in this compilation, women played significant roles in supporting the social and economic needs of their families despite their lack of education or skill, their young age, the lack of income opportunities in their village and their lack of information about work and living conditions outside their communities. In some instances, young women or girls became financially responsible for their families after a parent's death or illness or because of extreme poverty. Urgent economic need within women's families and the lack of economic opportunities for young women and girls in their communities meant that many women and young girls had to risk low-paid or unprotected labour opportunities elsewhere, even at great personal risk.

Women's migrant and other social identities change. Some experienced child labour at an early age, while others were trafficked as children. Women moved from being migrant workers to undocumented migrants to trafficked victims to documented migrants to returnee migrants; some women occupied a few of these identities simultaneously. Yet these legal categories or labels did not necessarily adequately or holistically reflect women's lives. One single framework or category may not be relevant for women's complex lives. The five stories demonstrated the complexity and emphasised that a

woman's trafficking experience does not define their whole life. The complex nature of women's lives plays a role in their reintegration process.

Often, women who had been trafficked struggled to have their lives recognised beyond their trafficking experience. Women who had been trafficked resisted the idea that her identity, her needs, her abilities and her worth could only be based on her trafficked experience, one phase in a very complex and rich life. Communities perceived Thai returnee migrant women, particularly those with Thai-Japanese children, as former sex workers and trafficked women. The resulting social stigma from the community proved an enormous barrier to women's attempts to re-build their lives.

Yet this is what women did. Women took many years and worked extremely hard to resist being categorised by others, to re-build their lives (e.g. building houses, finding other work), to reclaim their existence/position in their families and communities, to prove their capacity, and to gain recognition and respect in their communities. In many of the stories in this compilation, women spoke briefly about their trafficking experience but spoke at much greater length about the social challenges following women's return to their community. For example, when women returned to their own communities, there was also more recognition of the "money" that they were thought to bring into the community. Despite their economic contributions, women continued to experience discrimination, especially once the money had been spent and more money was needed to fulfill their families' needs.

Women found that assistance services for trafficked persons increased barriers to reintegration when they defined what a trafficked person needed and what a trafficked person was capable of. Women critiqued service providers and organisations that would only provide assistance by 'boxing women in' into a rigid category and argued that this weakened women's own efforts at reintegration. Women did not want to be defined by others, they wanted to define their experiences and their needs on their terms.

This was particularly the case when women talked about their children. In two of the five stories provided here, women concealed their trafficking experiences because they did not want their children to suffer socially or because they feared losing their children's love and respect. The other three women were adamant that their children and child kin would hear about their trafficking experiences from their mother's or their own perspective and on their own terms. Women discussed when they would talk about it with their children, how they would talk about it, and what lessons they most wanted to pass on to their children because of their trafficking experience.

All of the women sharing their stories here are now working with SEPOM and 4 of them are leaders for SEPOM Self-Help Groups in various districts. Women reported that their work with SEPOM allowed them to use their experiences as a resource (1) to inform and emotionally support other women who had similar experiences, and (2) to work towards broader social change in their community. Women also reported how they benefitted emotionally from having and creating safe spaces for women to share their challenges, to listen to different stories and to help each other. It also helped women resist and challenge the social stigma towards trafficked persons.

Action Plans

After 3 months of using FPAR to collect women's stories, SEPOM members formulated the following action plans:

1. SEPOM and 5 women who shared their stories plan to collect more women's stories to analyse the complex issues around gender, migration, trafficking and reintegration. The stories will highlight women's strengths in overcoming social stigma and gender inequity, and their efforts to gain recognition from society.
2. Proactively share FPAR key findings and analysis to all key SEPOM members during Self-Help Group meetings, members' training and other activities for SEPOM members.
3. Expand implementation of FPAR with more returnee women to encourage women to recognise their strength and capacity.

About SEPOM

SEPOM or the Self-Empowerment Program for Migrant Women was formed in 2001 by Thai women migrant workers who had returned from Japan and a Japanese volunteer. SEPOM's main objective is to empower and provide support for Thai women returnees from Japan. Many, but not all, of returning women from Japan have been trafficked but SEPOM chooses to identify the organisation as a "returnee migrant women's organisation" as a response to the stigma around trafficking and to include women who may be in need but who may not fit international or donor definitions of "trafficked". SEPOM outreaches to community members to identify returnee migrant workers and trafficked women, offers direct assistance (such as counselling and legal aid, community outreach, and an HIV/AIDS fund), co-ordinates care and treatment with the hospital and provides skill development training. SEPOM has also completed extensive work in seeking citizenship for the Thai-Japanese children of returnee women and in supporting the well-being and development of Thai-Japanese children through scholarships, educational and recreation activities. They have also developed income generation opportunities for women through seed funds, a cattle bank, a savings group and employment through the organisation. They are also a member organisation of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), based in Bangkok.

They can be contacted by email at sepom2002@hotmail.com , by telephone at +66-5-375-6411 or by mail at 120 M15 Sankhongluang St., Muang, Chiang Rai, Thailand, 57000. Donations can be sent to their bank account at: Thai Farmer's Bank (bank name), Chiang Rai branch, under the account name SEPOM and account number 154-2-75677-9 (savings account). Donations by Japanese postal order can be sent to: Thai Empowerment Program (account name), under the account number: 01780-2-96835.

Ku-Larp's Story

Ku-Larp¹, 44, has previous experience migrating for work in Japan and was trafficked. She returned to Thailand in 1994 and is currently involved in SEPOM group activities. She is a Self-Help Group leader in the Wiengchai Muang district.

Early family responsibilities

Ku-Larp is the youngest of 3 siblings. She completed Grade 4, then left school to work to help her parents send the eldest son to study in town, as her parents wanted. When she was 16, her mother got palsy and A had the idea to earn more money so she could help with her mother's medical expenses until her mother was cured. When she saw her classmates, who had also left school, going to work in other provinces, she decided to go and work in the Sunghai Kolok province in Thailand. Even though she did not yet consider herself the family breadwinner, she felt that finding the money to care for her mother was her responsibility: *"I was sad and scared when I got my bags and left the house but I forced myself to go. I was scared but I had to have hope in the future, and that helped push me to go."*

In 1981, Ku-Larp left home with other girls in her village to work in a brothel, to earn money for her mother's healthcare, but her mother died soon after. At the time, Ku-Larp felt very sad that even though she decided to go and work, she was unable to help her mother get better. Her father got a new wife straight away. Ku-Larp felt so bad about what had happened in her family so she decided to return to sex work in Hat Yai. In 1985, she was able to go and work in Singapore, where she met a friend she used to work with, who invited her to go and work in Japan.

Trafficked in Japan

In 1988, Ku-Larp decided to go to Japan for work. An agent organised all the fake travel documents for her. When Ku-Larp arrived, she was sold to a different place than the friend she was travelling with. Ku-Larp started to feel scared and wary. She was locked up for 2 days. Her boss had sold her to a snack bar for 280 hundred Yen. Ku-Larp was locked up and forced to serve customers by the Taiwanese pimp and shop owner. She was beaten and forced to please the customers, and forced to drink with them so they could sell her a lot more.

A new family

One year after working in the bar she managed to quit this job by paying off all her debts with the help of her Japanese boyfriend. She got a job at a factory freezing fresh vegetables, near her home. She felt so proud when she received her first pay from the factory as it was money that she had earned by herself, unlike in the past when she was forced to service others for wages.

Ku-Larp lived with her Japanese husband for about 1 year when she got pregnant. She had a bad pregnancy and got very sick due to anemia. She thought she would not survive it and decided to return home; she planned to build a house and legally register her marriage. But after her twin sons were born, her Japanese husband stopped contacting her. Ku-Larp tried every method to contact him again. The telephone calls from Thailand were costly. Ku-Larp sold one of her plots of land to cover the costs but she was still unable to find him. Ku-Larp soon gave up and was determined to raise her twins by herself and take care of her anemia. She later ended up having to sell off all her assets to cover her expenses.

¹ Not her real name.

She was very stressed and couldn't see a way out so she decided to work in the sex industry in Singapore again and contacted a local agent. She would pay off the cost of the agent after sleeping with 70 clients. Ku-Larp's children were the inspiration for this trip. When she had saved up enough, she would return home to care for them herself.

After she returned home, Ku-Larp got a job as a maid for a Japanese person in Chiang Rai (province) for 1 year. Then she worked in a restaurant in Chiang Mai, where she met her current husband. They helped each other by doing hired labor, such as construction work and working in the fields. Ku-Larp had never done this kind of work before but she was willing to put up with it to earn money for her 2 children. She had a limited education so she was willing to do any work she thought she could do. She is happy with her new family life and because they did not have any children together, her current husband loves and cares for her sons as if they are his own.

Starting again

In Ku-Larp's opinion, the whole time she was moving around and working on her own was a big waste - traveling around and having to endure the hardships of what she felt was immoral work, always being wary because she was not able to speak the language, having to endure both physical and mental hardships. All of it was a complete waste when she considers that, now, her life is back to where she started, that is, being poor and having financial burdens.

In 2004, Ku-Larp heard about SEPOM and joined them as a social work volunteer to help other women who had migrated for work. Ku-Larp had the chance to join trainings on teaching others about and protecting the rights of female workers and victims of trafficking. It has made her realise that her terrible experiences were not her fault. Also, working to help others with the same problems is the inspiration that has made Ku-Larp stronger and more confident in her ability to raise her family and work locally. At the same time, she can serve as a leader to help other women who have problems stemming from migration and those struggling to reintegrate back into their community. Gaining acceptance from the group and the community is an experience that cannot be measured financially but is so valuable in her life today.

Trafficked person's perspective on how to best support victims of trafficking

Ku-Larp has the opportunity to work with other organisations and agencies in educational trainings on trafficking and migration. Even though Ku-Larp is well aware that she is a victim of trafficking and has the right to receive care and rehabilitation, she believes that support, for women who have returned to their communities, should come in the form of opportunities for sustainable occupations and include efforts to increase women's confidence in their ability to create a new and better life.

Just being a friend and looking out for others in the group is the most necessary part because the support would not focus on their status as "trafficking victims" all the time because they are memories and images they all want to forget. Ku-Larp says, *"I received a lot of help from various places, as a trafficking victim, from both the government and NGOs. But if I had the right to choose, I would choose just normal help, without the terms 'trafficking' or 'victim' being used."*

Ku-Larp says, *"The help is too late. I've been back for 10 years now and am only just getting support. And if I could choose, I don't want them to use my real name, my real surname, and reveal my background or discuss me by name, and expose us. Once, for SEPOM work, I talked about trafficking and my experiences but not anymore because my*

children are grown now and I worry their friends will tease them. If we get help, we just want help without using the word 'trafficking' because it makes us feel like we have a defect and, in our hearts, we will never heal.... "The most important thing that will make us stronger and enable us to overcome our problems is to meet and talk amongst ourselves about our problems. Knowing we are not the only one with this problem, or giving moral support to our friends is like giving ourselves moral support, too. Sometimes, working as a group leader, I can see my own strength when I advise other friends in the group."

Currently, Ku-Larp is still a Self-Help Group leader in her area, working to create a safe space through talking with and supporting women with the same experience as herself. She is currently getting a legal divorce from her estranged Japanese husband who she has lost contact with over 15 years ago. She is also changing her sons' surnames as it is embarrassing that they have a Japanese surname. Agencies have been helping to locate her estranged husband and her divorce application is being processed.

Bee's story

Bee's² story tells of one Thai woman who escaped from traffickers in Thailand and Japan and returned to northern Thailand to lead a self-help group for SEPOM (or Self Empowerment Program for Migrant Women).

Becoming the breadwinner

In her childhood, Bee (not her real name) now 48, and her family were supported by her father, the main breadwinner. However, at a young age, family responsibilities were passed to Bee when her father died and her eldest brother was forced to flee their village after being accused of murder. By this time, Bee had been married and divorced and was already solely responsible for raising her 13 month old daughter as well as supporting her eldest sister who had moved home after the death of her husband. She said: *"At that time, I was so stressed, I would go and sleep alone at the head of my father's coffin at the cemetery; I didn't want anything else. But, when I thought of my child and my family, I had to go back home and keep going."*

Then Bee met a Japanese man through a friend from her village. For many months they dated and he later sent her money from Japan. Against her own values, Bee decided to sleep with him to ensure that he would continue to provide gifts of money. Bee says, *"At that time, I felt I was a bad woman for sleeping with someone who was not my husband but once I had done it, I might as well continue, and because I saw he had a lot of money. His money helped me care for my child, my mother, my older sister and my disabled brother."* At this point, with the help of a friend, Bee decided to become a sex worker.

Escaping a brothel to work independently

Following her friend's suggestions Bee travelled to the Thai-Malaysia border to find work. Focusing on why she was working kept her going: *"I want to earn money to send to my mother for family expenses so she has everything she needs, and for my child who I was not there to raise myself."* She worked there for a short time, until she had saved enough money to go home, where she hoped to find a different job.

Bee had to leave her home again to find work when her brother in hiding, who had a run-in with a powerful person in their town, needed money. This time however, unbeknown to Bee she was sold by her brother to one of his friends who owned a brothel in the Narathiwat province. Bee's determination to help her brother, and because she knew her employer, meant that she had not been afraid of going away to work. After sometime, however, she discovered she was bonded to her employer and "in debt" as her brother had been regularly withdrawing her pay from the owner³. She fled the brothel.

After leaving the brothel, for a while, she - together with other sex workers -worked independently: *"Some of the girls who couldn't stand the pressure and exploitation, joined together to work. We rented a room together and worked without having anyone take a cut in our earnings or forcing us to do anything. We would look out for each other and find our own customers, like a self-reliant group. When some of the girls had saved enough money, they left the group to return home."* About a year later Bee decided to return home.

² Not her real name.

³ This fits the UN definition of trafficking as it involves the 3 elements of recruitment, movement or transfer, and exploitation (in this case, debt bondage). Working independently as a sex worker or traveling independently does not constitute trafficking.

Escaping exploitation in Japan

Instead of finding peace when she returned home, Bee was met by demands from her mother and her siblings, particularly to pay for the education of her and her siblings' children. Bee went to work in a restaurant in the Nakorn Nayok province and met her second husband Tam (not his real name), a soldier and a responsible man with a stable job. While Bee was happy, she felt the burden of her family responsibilities. She decided to leave Tam and find work in Japan. A friend and agent prepared the necessary travel documents. Bee grew worried about the debt of 270,000 yen (nearly \$US 3000) she incurred, which was the cost of travelling to Japan.

On arriving in Japan, Bee soon found out that she had been sold to a brothel. She and other Thai women in the brothel tried every method they could think of to flee and get help. However, numerous letters to embassies and family members asking for help remained unanswered. About that time in her time, Bee says: *"if nobody could help me [then], I had to adjust and be able to live with my situation. If, as a victim of trafficking, someone should come and help me now, it is too late anyway. I want them to help the women who are still there."*

Finding an alternative livelihood in Japan

After paying off her debt, Bee left the brothel and went to work in another district. Her goal was to save enough money to leave sex work and open a Thai restaurant with her later to be Japanese husband Hiroki (not his real name) who had been a regular client of hers. Bee's restaurant was very successful, she worked extremely hard and made a lot of money. Bee worked hard at her restaurant, using all her experience in everything she'd done, to help make plans and manage the restaurant. She was able to send some of the profits to her family in Thailand to cover the costs of raising her child and also to save. She saved her money in her Japanese boyfriend's bank account until she figured out that she had enough money to go back to Thailand with. Her business was doing well and she was living quite well so she decided it was time to return home.

The whole time that Bee had been working there, she had endured a lot and had to be strong, with the knowledge that she was helping her family who were behind her. And it was luck that ensured Bee had good friends, good people around her, to support her and not make her feel alone. When she thinks back on her memories of the past, she can laugh about it. Bee says *"At the time I had a regular Japanese client who later became my friend and helped me a lot."*

"Of my experiences in Japan, I want women who are thinking they'll get rich by going to know that it's not like digging for gold. Even if you have a handbag full of money you can't go and sleep in a hotel. It's not that I forbid them to go but it's better to go legally. I understand that they want to get rich. The important thing is to act correctly. If you look at the kinds of women going now, the type of sex workers are different from before because they really were poor and illiterate. Nowadays, they are all educated women. Don't they ever look at themselves and see that, really, they are just like us?"

Difficulties upon return to Thailand

While in Japan, Bee sent large amounts of money to her sister to buy land, to build a new house, and to build an ice factory - a home-based business to be managed by her sister. But upon her arrival in Thailand, she found her plans had come to nothing and that her sister had not used the money as had been discussed but rather was fighting over the money with her brother.

Bee found she had lost everything she had planned for in Japan and was again faced with the constant demands of her mother and sister. Bee decided to divide up all her money among her family members and leave her family to find work and visit her former husband Tam in Nakorn Nayok. There, she opened a restaurant and lived with Tam, regularly sending money to her children and her younger brother.

When her sister died, she decided to move back into the family home. Bee wanted a fresh start in her hometown and with her family but found a lack of work opportunities other than farming. As a solution, Bee started gambling: *"I did it to get money for my child, not to make it a habit. When I'd won 100-200 baht I'd stop because my children just needed B50 each a day, or B100 for both per day."* Bee was gambling when she met her new husband Nak (not his real name) from the same community and started working on their pineapple plantation, a new experience for Bee: *"I started doing it because I felt sorry for him. I'd always see him go and do hired labor and come home and give me the money. I watched him do this for 2-3 months and decided I couldn't just wait for his money. He saw that I was a hard worker and wanted to support me because we have known each other since we were little."*

Strength in the face of discrimination

Bee has faced many challenges and difficulties in her life. Having been trafficked twice, she resisted and escaped both times to start new economic ventures both in Japan and Thailand, as a sex worker (working together with other independent sex workers), in the restaurant business (opening restaurants in Thailand and Japan) and on her husband's pineapple plantation.

Despite the complexities of her life experiences, her goals for the future and the strength she has shown throughout her life, Bee still experiences the stigma of being labeled "trafficked": *"Some people gossip about me but if I am not there to hear it, so what? If I hear about it I go and ask them if it's true and they go quiet."* Sometimes there will be talk in the community that does make Bee feel bad. Bee says *"Someone once asked me if a monk wanted to sleep with me, would I do it? In my heart, I wanted to yell at them but I couldn't because it was someone from my community so I just gave a funny answer that if he didn't come in his yellow robe I would. Others look down on me and say I have such a big family so will I be able to raise them with no money left. When I hear this I just think, so what, let them say what they want. I don't want to take it to heart because I've done the best I could."*

Even without money or regular employment, Bee remains fiercely proud of her position as head of her family: *"When I had money, I built things for other people and now that there's none left, I can still help other people"*.

Celebrating her strength and generosity

Bee has never felt that her past experiences should be kept a secret, or something to be ashamed of but rather as an important lesson to pass on to her children. She feels strongly that if her children want to know about trafficking, they should hear it from her directly rather than community gossip or media stereotypes. And importantly, if they know, she wants them to know the whole story and learn from not only her experiences of exploitation but also about how she overcame obstacles and fought back in exploitative situations: *"look at me as an example that you should listen to yourself and not depend on others, and to learn from new things and change yourself to adjust to them."*

Bee also places great importance on making her mother happy by helping her siblings and their families; she feels her burden will be lifted when she has fulfilled her obligations as a daughter, *"I want to leave everyone with the hope that they love themselves and*

believe in themselves the most. When things were difficult, no one helped me as much as all the help I had given everyone else. Sometimes when I think of the people that I once helped, I start crying. It really hurt, deep down” and a mother “I once made the big mistake of not having any money or assets for my children. I had been giving them all to others - my relatives and siblings - because I thought they couldn’t help themselves.”

Helping others

Bee has since become a Self-Help Group leader in the Muang district for SEPOM in Chiang Rai. Bee joined a SEPOM self-help group 2 years ago and has since become a group leader that reaches out and visits trafficked women and returnee migrant women in the Muang district to help them with their difficulties and also their aspirations: *“Meeting up with and talking to my friends in the group, visiting them and having the time to chat, even though it’s not often, is like giving myself a reward. It’s a time when I can think of myself and think of my feelings, with friends who understand me and had the same problems. Sometimes I’m able to advise them or give them ideas, as a friend, from my own experiences.”*

Sri's story

Sri⁴, aged 40, has previous experience migrating to work in Japan and was trafficked. She returned to Thailand in 1992 and currently participates in SEPOM group activities. She is a Self-Help Group leader in the Mae Sai district, Chiang Rai.

Parental illness and death

Sri is the youngest of 5 siblings. Her family was middle-class. Sri had to leave school after completing Grade 6 to look after her mother because she was crippled and her father had died. All of her siblings had married and left the village. Sri had to find work to support herself and care for her mother. When Sri was 12 she went to look after her older sister's children and hoped to be able to go to school as well, but she did not. Sri worked there for over a year then she got a job selling things, in Pichit province. She worked there for a while but then she had to return home to go to the hospital. At that time, she went into the hospital often. Then in 1987 someone invited her to work as a maid in Hat Yai, for over THB⁵ 10,000 a month: *"At first, I didn't want to go because I didn't know them well and was afraid of what they would do to me."* But when her mother had to go into hospital and they needed a lot of money to pay for it, Sri contacted that agent to borrow money to pay for her mother's treatment and then to go and work off the loan in Hat Yai.

Trafficked in Thailand, Malaysia, and Japan

The first 2-3 months that Sri worked in Hat Yai, she worked as a maid doing the laundry and buying the groceries, at an agent's resthouse where women going to and coming from Japan stayed. Her wages were only THB 4,000-5,000 per month, not THB 10,000 as she was told: *"I didn't really want to stay there but I was in debt so I couldn't leave."* Sri was not working there for long until she was invited to go and work overseas. She decided to go with the help of an agent, via Malaysia: *"At that time, I was scared of where they would take me, because of the state of the place they'd taken me to. I said to my friend who I'd gone with that it was like a prison. There were many women there, but they were older. At that time, I still thought I'd be going to work as a maid."* Not long after, the agent took Sri to receive her first client, only telling her that she would be taken outside: *"I was tricked before I knew what was happening. I was taken to a hotel and forced to stay with the client for 2 nights. I didn't know what to do. It would've been good if I accidentally ran into a policeman."*

When Sri travelled to Japan, the agent kept her and didn't let her go outside like the other women, but helped Sri get a fake passport. Sri worked for this agent for one year without receiving any wages. Then the agent sold her to a snack bar and she was immediately made to go out with clients: *"I was so scared. The clients had to force me to do things. I couldn't do anything because I had always been controlled by others, forced. I was full of regret but I had just had to keep going."*

Escaping to a new life

Sri worked under the control of the mamasan and tried to learn Japanese and the various roads because, when she had the chance, she was planning to escape from the bar: *"There was one time when I was sick. I didn't have to work, and I was taken to the doctor until I recovered. I started to learn the directions and how to get to places, and my Japanese was good so I was able to escape."* Sri went to live with her Japanese partner, a regular

⁴ Not her real name.

⁵ At time of writing, approximately \$1 US = 30 Thai baht.

client, as she felt the bar probably had sent the Yakuza to look for her. Sri was able to hide with her partner for over a year, then moved out to live with Thai friends who she knew when they worked at the bar together. Even though Sri had a free life by now, she decided to go back to work so she could send money to her older sister for her mother's hospital costs. She did this until she met her Japanese husband and was ready to stop that kind of work and start a new life.

“When I was going through the really terrible times, I did not cry out or make a noise. I would just stop thinking about it and tell myself that I just have to get through it, and have hope for the future. When I think about when I received my first client in Japan, I was so scared. It was good he didn't just strangle me to death. At that time, I was already thinking of a way out and if I didn't do as I was told, things would be worse for me. I would count from 1 to 10 and just let it happen. I'd seen people being punished, being locked up and beaten. I even saw someone locked up in chains. I didn't want that to happen to me. I just had to survive. Since that was what my life had become, I had to accept it and try and make as much money as I could because if I stopped or was caught that would be the end of everything. All my endurance, everything I put up with, would have been for nothing.”

Returning to Thailand

When Sri's mother died, she made plans to return to Thailand with her Japanese husband and register their marriage in Japan and Thailand. Sri traveled back to Thailand on her own first, to arrange the documents, but she discovered she was 3 months pregnant. She was in contact with her partner but it wasn't convenient to coordinate marriage documents and visas with him. It was also costly because she had to pay THB 300-400 each time she contacted him. So she decided to stop contacting him and save money to raise her child. After she gave birth, Sri tried to contact him again but he did not try to contact her back so she decided not to try and contact him again.

When Sri returned home, she now had a baby but no husband so she decided to live by herself. Even though many girls from her community had gone to do the same work that Ink did, she was still gossiped about by members of the community. She remained strong because of the people close to her, such as her brother and sister who had always helped her when she needed it. For example, when her half-Japanese child was born in Thailand, her brother signed the documents as her father and the baby was able to use Sri's surname. Sri's determination to come home enabled her to endure the gossip from neighbors who did not understand her.

Resisting stigma and building a new identity

Sri stayed home and raised her child. Her Japanese partner occasionally sent her some money but Sri mainly lived off the money she had saved while working in Japan. Sri raised her daughter herself for 3 years and then her savings started to run out. So Sri married a man from her village and hoped to start a new life, like other women in the village. She tried to act like a good woman because society was still not so open about accepting women who had once done sex work. People in her community felt this way so Ink tried to act appropriately so that she would be accepted.

She started to join in more community activities, starting with being a health volunteer. At first, her community didn't accept her and talked about her past but she kept trying and was determined to do more work. She later received the award for best health volunteer, and it was something that made her feel the proudest she had felt in her whole life: *“I was glad that was able to get over the insults. I moved forward with my family and my work.”*

She has been selected to participate in community activities, such as (1) village volunteer group, (2) Housewives Committee (Department of Women's Development), (3) secretary for a chicken-breeders group, (4) Committee of the Developing Community Project, (5) Baan Chum Muang Yen Committee, (6) president of Sai Yai Rak Group, and (7) Self-Help Group leader for SEPOM in the Mae Sai District.

"It's very difficult working for the community because in some places, they don't understand the work and I have to explain a lot, and I have to train myself on the things they don't understand so I can explain it. But it's harder being a Self-Help Group leader because not all of the women reveal their past, and they are not all from the same community. It takes a lot of understanding. I learn about the lives of others and add it to the things I know, to use in my life, as a benefit for my own life. In the Self Help Groups, some people know more than me, so I learn from them."

She was determined to work hard to gain acceptance from the community and for her own pride, and is certain she will continue doing this in future. She went back to school and completed her high school education, and plans to study for a Bachelor's degree. Sri is happy working hard in her fields and selling produce with her husband, caring for her family and children, doing social work and studying.

Reconciling her past with her children

What keeps her going is that, when her children are older and learn about her past, she hopes that the work she is doing now will help erase her sad past and that her children will remember and be proud of the things she is doing now.

"When it's time, when they've finished their studies, if they ask me I will tell them about it. I think I'm ready to do it. Putting my children through school, to this level, is the best I could've done. And I have done so much social work that the community accepts me now. My children should understand because when they learn about my past, they will still see all the good I've done for society, for my children, and for my family. They should be able to change their feelings on their mother's past for themselves. I don't want to talk about the past but I never thought to erase them from my memory because I don't think it's so very terrible. I'd like to keep the memories so when I watch TV with my children I can teach them about things."

Sri still keeps all the documents from her Japanese partner in case, in the future, her son wants to know and contact his father himself: *"All the documents. I have photos and his address. But I will wait until he's older than this. I don't want him to be confused about it before he graduates. Once he has graduated, he can go to find him because he often says that he'd like to see his father's face at least once in his life and asks for details about him all the time. If he still wants to meet him then, it's fine with me."*

Sri believes that life pushed her into terrible situations and when there was no one who could help, she had to look after herself, endure it and be strong, and be determined to develop herself to change the community's negative attitudes: *"I want to tell other women to respect themselves and not let others look down on them. Whatever you do, think of yourselves. You can make your own decisions, you don't have to depend on others, and don't believe other people so easily."* Sri has received support as a victim of trafficking. She does not think that it is something to be ashamed of but, rather, it was an opportunity for her to get assistance and develop herself, until today.

Som's story

Som⁶, aged 36, has previous experience migrating to work in Japan and was trafficked. She returned to Thailand in 1999 and currently participates in SEPOM's Self-help Group activities in Muang district.

Working at an early age

When Som was little, she lived with the 4 other members of her family. She was the second eldest child. Her father was hired to do construction work in Libya and her mother sold things in the village market. Som only completed Grade 6 because her father had no more work and had to return home. She felt that she was not smart and she didn't do well at school so she quit so that her younger brother and older sister could stay in school.

So she and some friends from the village went looking for work in the Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai provinces. At that time, Som and her friends were 15-16 years old. Her first job was as a nursemaid, then she worked in a restaurant in Chiang Rai, and then as a waitress in a Chiang Mai restaurant. She regularly sent money home even though they did not ask her to. She spent many years working away from home, and only got to visit her family during holidays. One time when she went back home to visit family, a neighbor invited Som to go and work with her in Sunghai Golok, a district in Naratiwart province, near the Thai-Malaysia border. Som and her friends decided to go even though they didn't know what kind of work it was or what their living situation would be. But she received money in advance from the neighbor, which she gave to her parents to use while she was away at her new job.

Trafficked in Thailand and Japan

She felt scared and blamed herself for deciding to go and for ending up in sex work. She was always reminded by the pimp that she had to work to repay the money she was given in advance, as well as the money she had withdrawn and sent home when she first started working. She worked for 3 years but was never able to repay her debt.

Som decided to call her family and tell them the truth about working in the sex industry, her debt, and her terrible living conditions. When her parents found out, they sold their house to buy back Som and bring her home, but they never blamed her for getting into that situation. However, people in the community gossiped about Som going to work in the sex industry and making her parents sell their house. It took her a lot of time and endurance to accept this situation. She spent over a year at home, helping her parents work around the house.

Then a relative came and suggested that she go to work in Japan, telling her the pay was really good, everything was good, and that it wasn't like Thailand where things were so hard. She took time to think about it and decided to return to sex work just for 3 months because when she first returned from Sunghai Kolok she decided she would never do this kind of work again. She thought she had been home long enough but nothing had improved, so she decided to go with the same group of friends who she'd worked with in Sunghai Kolok. She was sure that everything would be fine because she was going to work with a relative and friends.

When she arrived in Japan, she found out she was already in debt for 350 hundred Yen, approximately THB 700,000. Her relative took Som and her friends to work at a snack bar.

⁶ Not her real name.

After they finished work, they had to go back and sleep at the relative's apartment. Som's relative forced her to work all the time; even when she was sick. She was able to endure this and had almost paid off her debt, with only 80 hundred Yen left to pay, when she felt she could not endure it anymore and decided to escape with 3 of her friends.

Escape and a new family

After they escaped, Som and her friends continued to do sex work, to send money to her father to build a new house. The house was almost finished when she met a Thai man. They lived together for 4 months and then she became pregnant. After she became pregnant with their second child, Som decided to return to Thailand to raise them.

She and her partner decided that Som would return first, with the children, and her partner would follow. Her partner gave her money to live on when she was back in Thailand, and sent money to her regularly without fail. After she had returned home and given birth, she started to enjoy life and go out drinking, and asked for more money from her partner. He sent money to her for 2 years. Then they started having problems and ended up separating. Now that she had to depend on herself and raise her 2 children alone, she decided to go and work in a karaoke bar in Phuket as a waitress and hostess. She worked here for about 2 years to send money home to her parents to buy milk and care for her children. When her children were a bit older, she returned home.

Returning home

Som returned home to raise her children and did hired work for income, enough to live on. Then she met her new boyfriend, a Thai man who lived in her village. She lived with him until they had a baby, then properly moved out of her parents home. She found a new house for them, wanting freedom to start a new life with her new family. She was determined to start a new family and create stability for the future of her child. She endured a lot and it took a lot of effort to sustain the relationship with her husband, to work hard and never give up. When she heard the stories of other women who had to migrate for work, and the problems each of them had, and talked to friends in the Self-Help Group, it gave her the strength to handle things and enabled her to get on with her life. Som felt empowered and started to work farming, harvesting rice and beans, which she had never really done before.

"It's heavy work. I've never planted rice or harvested rice. When I did construction work I had to endure it until I was good at it, until other people wanted to hire me. I almost gave up in the beginning but I saw that others could do it so I should also be able to do it."

Her children's future

Now, Som feels satisfied with her life - her situation and her physical and mental strength - to keep going for her family and her children. Her main worry is about her children's education because she doesn't yet have enough money to give them a high education. It will be the tool to protect her 3 daughters and ensure that they will not have to endure the same terrible situations that she did. She will not tell her children about her past, even if it could serve as a valuable lesson for them. She does not dare tell them in case they are disappointed in her for working in the sex industry.

Currently, Som participates in activities with one of SEPOM's Self-Help Groups for women who have migrated for work. The members meet regularly for activities, such as health trainings, home visits and to provide support. Som worked with SEPOM to request vocational funding for former trafficking victims, and received THB 18,000.

Even though it is not a large amount of money in comparison to the unhappiness and tortuous situations she encountered in the past, it is enough to help with her present situation. Even though the process of accessing this support took a long time and meant she had to dare to talk about her horrible past with staff and the selection committee, it was good that she, at least, received some support and she doesn't think revealing her past will have a negative effect among society in general. However, her daughters must not learn or read about her experience because she is not yet ready to handle their reactions. She feels it is a sensitive issue that will impact the respect her children have always had for her.

Dork-Mai's story

Dork-Mai⁷, age 40, has previous experience migrating to work in Japan and was trafficked. She returned to Thailand in 1996 and currently participates in SEPOM group activities. She is a Self-Help Group leader in the Wiengchai district.

Her family

Dork-Mai has 4 siblings – 3 brothers and 1 sister. Dork-Mai is the eldest daughter and her parents are farmers. She completed Grade 3 when she was 11 and didn't study further because, in those days, in her household, children were not pushed to stay in school and being able to write your own name was considered enough education. Her school also only went up to Grade 4. If you wanted to study further, you had to study in the nearest town which was far away and E's family was very poor. The highest education any of her siblings received was Grade 4. Dork-Mai and her sister had to leave school and help her parents work in the fields: *"I felt bad that I couldn't stay in school. If I did, I would've had better opportunities than this."*

When she was 13, she decided to go and work in a restaurant in Bangkok as a cleaner. She went with a friend from her village. She says, *"At that time we were so poor. Our house was just a small shack. We didn't have many clothes, we had to exchange chickens in order to have clothes to wear. We would have one tin of rice to boil with bamboo to feed 6-7 people. Life was so hard. I had to go even though I had no idea what Bangkok was like and I was scared. Because we were so poor we just stayed in the countryside. Whatever was decided was decided. I also wanted to see the big city, too."*

Becoming an economic provider

Dork-Mai worked for THB 1,500 per month and sent THB 1,000 home every month. She worked there for 2 years when her father wrote her telling her to come home to apply for her Thai citizenship ID card. Dork-Mai then found out that her father was in a lot of debt to the cooperative, and that none of her brothers, who had left home to work, had ever sent money home. This was the point where she decided that, no matter what, she would be the main pillar of the family and will work to help look after the family. When she went home to get her ID card, the relative who invited her to work in Bangkok approached her about working in the sex industry in Bangkok. Dork-Mai says, *"I saw girls from her village with money and I thought to myself that if I was able to go, I could have as much money as them. I don't want to be poor anymore, it's just so hard. No matter how hard it is to get there, I must find a way to go."*

When she had decided to go, she told her parents that she was going to work in the sex industry in Bangkok, when she didn't even know what that meant. Her family was against it but once she had made up her mind she was determined to go. Soon after, the sister of her friend who asked her to go came and invited her to go and be a *เป็นนางโท* (nang-tao⁸). But when she went, she didn't work straight away, she just did the washing and ironing. She had to wait for over a month until her employer found a customer to deflower her.

"While I was there but not yet doing sex work, I always thought, well, I've come this far already, whatever I do next I will get money for and I will save up and send that money to my family to rebuild the house. But when I found out I would be deflowered by a client I got scared. So I drank alcohol to make it easier but since I'd never drank before, I was

⁷ Not her real name.

⁸ A woman who works in sex work but clients can only call them to provide service at a client's place.

drunk after just one glass and I didn't really know what was happening. If my life was a cartoon, that would have been both funny and sad."

Dork-Mai worked there for 4 years and was able to send money home for her parents until they built a new house and had an easier life. When she went home, she never left the house because the community had a negative attitude towards sex workers. At that time, not many women from there went into sex work or, they did but they did not reveal this to others: *"People were saying that I got money to build a new house from doing sex work and I was embarrassed and didn't want to go out anywhere. Parents of my old school friends told them not to see me because I was a bad person."*

"Better than going back to poverty"

When she was 18, an agent in the community invited her to go and work in Japan. The agent was responsible for organising all her travel documents and expenses. However, when they arrived, the agent sold Dork-Mai for 30,000 Yen. During her time in Japan, Dork-Mai was sold often because she was not getting much work.

*"After the house was built, they wanted a tractor so I had to think how to get rich. When I was leaving for Japan, I didn't tell my family until the last day, when I wrote a letter saying that I was no longer in Thailand but had gone to Japan." The family would get the letter after she'd already arrived in Japan. Her parents didn't want her to go. They wanted her to come home, and they cried. But Dork-Mai says *"But I had already decided to travel and there was no turning back because I had been through a lot already and learned a lot from my experiences. I had no more fear left in me."**

"I didn't know how many hundred thousand Yen it would take. I didn't care! I was there to work. If I knew more than this, I'd run away. But the mamasan knew this and sold me again straight away for 280 hundred Yen. I sometimes felt like giving up and cried, thinking I'll probably die here, because no matter how much I worked, my debt never seemed to decrease. But, I had to accept my situation."

"I wondered when it would all end, but my final destination was always my home. But I also thought that, if I went home with no money, we'd be poor again like before. The thing that made me strong and got me through was the image of being poor that was always in my memory. It made me not give up, and I said to myself, 'I am never going to have a hard life like that again.' Sometimes I had bad clients but I had to put up with them. It's better than going back to poverty. If it got really bad, I'd cry for a while then keep going."

Her time in Japan, when she was struggling to survive all the time, made her stronger. Dork-Mai was single and had only herself to rely on, and never thought to get a Japanese partner. She saw her friends get Japanese husbands but they were not successful relationships and she didn't want to be in the same situation. Dork-Mai was caught and repatriated to Thailand after being in Japan for 7 years.

When Dork-Mai arrived back in Thailand, she didn't contact her family, but just asked a relative living in Bangkok to pick her up. When she got home she saw that her community had developed and changed because more girls from the village had gone into sex work and there was less negative gossip about girls doing this kind of work. After she was home for over a year, her father died so she went to work in the sex trade in Sunghai Kolok and Malaysia for the same reason - because of poverty at home.

Unfortunately, she was arrested in Malaysia and jailed. E recalls that time in jail as terrible, and a time that she wished she could forget. *"The conditions in the jail were terrible. It was so filthy; there were mites and insects that sucked your blood, fleas. I was persecuted*

and had my head shaved. The living conditions in the jail make me never want to go there again. I remember it to this day."

Working for the community and future plans

When Dork-Mai decided to go back and live at home, she started farming and invested in fish breeding, but she had problems. She lost money on it and someone was stealing the fish and vegetables. She also had no idea about managing her money and, after a while, her savings were almost gone. Dork-Mai used the rest of her money to sell dried foods with her family at the market near her house.

It took her almost 2 years to feel settled and to feel confident enough to participate in community activities until she felt accepted. She joined community activities and helped with village and community events. As someone who speaks her mind, many of the villagers wanted to nominate her for the community committee but she has always turned them down.

"From all my experiences, the bad and good, I was able to teach things to my nieces and nephews. When they ask me what I've done in the past, I tell them directly that if I didn't go things would have just been the same. Also, there were some who went but came home empty-handed and were worse off than me. If this is all I got, it's good enough. Before you go, think it over well. Get all the information you can before you go."

Now that she's come this far, no matter what happens, she will never go back. This is what enabled her to always stand on her own feet. Another role that Dork-Mai currently has is as a SEPOM group leader who does home visits to help other women with the same experience. Dork-Mai decided to join in SEPOM's because she used to have so many problems and if she can meet with friends with the same experiences, she can help more women. This is what made her want to do social work, even though she has little formal education.

"When I do this work, it makes me feel better and I can advise them using my own experiences. For example, that drinking doesn't solve any problems and working in the sex industry now is not the same as before. There have been people asking about trafficking victims and I feel like asking them why are you asking now? Why didn't anyone come and help me when I needed help? But I accept my situation, especially if my experiences can help teach others to protect themselves better. I used to think that my lack of knowledge was a disadvantage but I've erased that thinking from my head now."

She has future plans to start a passion fruit plantation with her nephew. She is proud of herself for being strong and able to support her mother and nieces on her own.

"Without a husband, I am able to stand on my own because of the real poverty I experienced, and I am also supporting my aunt who has palsy. I will remember all my past experiences as lessons, as things that I have already gone through and that I have to make sure I never have to experience again. I have to remember them as lessons learned."

Now, she feels that she is stronger and better understands life. But sometimes when she is alone she thinks about the past and the family burden she carries now and she feels depressed. To feel better, she listens to music and goes out to see her friends. Visiting the members of her Self-Help Group, as the leader, is the kind of work that she is happy to do and, in return, it gives her strength.

