

Welcoming party at the port: Working together for unaccompanied children at Manila Port

It is night in the Manila Port area. Never a good time for women and children to be on the streets alone. Yet day and night thousands of women and young people arrive here in search of work to support their families back home in the provinces. According to Visayan Forum, an NGO that works to protect new arrivals, Manila Port is the last place where vulnerable women and children are visible and can be helped. Once they leave this area, they simply vanish into a city offering low-paid and often illegal opportunities to earn money -- from factory jobs and domestic service to bar work and prostitution.

Nineteen-year-old Beth Gonzales knows what it is like to be exploited. She was left without a home after she fell out with the people who employed her as a domestic servant. She fell into conversation with a woman who offered her a place to stay. Before the end of the evening she had been drugged and the woman had sold her virginity to a merchant seaman on a visiting ship. She was only 17 years old then and it took her a whole year to get out of sex work.

There are some 7,000 islands in the Philippine archipelago and every year around five million people, as many as half of them young girls and women, arrive at Manila Port by ferry. Alfonso Cusi is General Manager of the Philippine Ports Authority, a crucial partner of Visayan Forum. "For unguided children to be in Manila is a big problem," he says. "We in the Ports Authority are aware of that and considering they are passing through our ports we believe we have a social responsibility to prevent them from coming into Manila, especially if they are not properly guided."

Once unaccompanied children are identified, the police will try and check their details and age. If the police believe they may be bound for illegal work, or if they need help or advice, then they are taken to Visayan Forum's Halfway House. There the workers can try and contact the children's parents and look after them until their promised jobs can be verified. Understandably, it is a harrowing time for the young people.

It is hard work for Visayan Forum, too, and they cannot manage it alone. Visayan Forum has partners in the battle to protect women and children from the pimps and recruiters who look out for them as they arrive. Manila Port's Security Guards play a vital role in identifying and protecting vulnerable young people. Another key partner is the Philippine Coast Guard. They act on tip-offs -- often from ferry captains and crew -- to board the ferries before they arrive, because once the ferry has docked and the passengers disembark, children at risk will be hard to spot.

They work closely with others, too: the Ports Authority, ferry companies, the Port Police. Visayan Forum is licensed by the Department of Social Welfare to provide secure temporary care for minors as well as counselling and other services, and is supported by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF.

Carmella Torres, National Programme Manager of ILO's International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour, says that children are targeted by those who want to exploit them for both labour and commercial sexual exploitation. "They are very vulnerable and once they are exposed to a place which is very new to them with no relatives or friends around, they can be placed in a situation of work where they can be exploited, abused or even sexually exploited," she says.