THE INDEPENDENT INQUIRY
INTO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE (IICSA)
BEFORE CHAIR PROFESSOR ALEXIS JAY OBE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SHERRYL M. LOSENO

I, SHERRYL M. LOSENO of DPA
DPA Manila Philippines will say as follows:

1. I make this statement in order to assist the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales in its investigation into the abuse of children outside the United Kingdom.

2. I am the Head of Protective and Transformative Care Services of Voice of the Free - VF Foundation, Inc. Voice of the Free (formally the Visayan Forum Foundation) was formally launched in April 1991. Voice of the Free is a non-governmental organisation in the Philippines known for innovations in addressing modern day slavery, especially human trafficking. It operates a number of programmes including residential care and community-based programmes and services for women and children who have been trafficked or sexually exploited. It has four core programmes which provide protective and transformative services for women and children who have been sexually exploited. We have assisted more than 70,000 people escape the horrors of human trafficking.
3. I am attaching, marked as Exhibit [SL/1], a profile of the organisation prepared by the Skoll Foundation, which gave us an award in 2008. The work of our organisation and in particular that of my colleague Cecilia Flores-Oebanda was featured in a CNN documentary, 'The Fighters,' in 2013.

4. In this statement, I use the term trafficking to mean child sexual exploitation more generally. In the Philippines, child sexual exploitation is called “aggravated trafficking”. We work with victims of internal trafficking, that is women and child who are trafficked from one part of the Philippines to another, for exploitation. It is important to understand that there are 700 islands in the Philippines and that traffickers move people by shipping. We also work with victims who are being trafficked from the Philippines to another country, most commonly to the Middle East. We also work with children in the Philippines who are not geographically relocated but we consider that these children have also been trafficked into sexual exploitation. These children also have traffickers.

Our Work

5. We work in communities and schools to make sure that people are aware of the ‘red flag’ indicators of trafficking. We go into schools, and provide orientation on this issue. After these orientations, some children report cases of human trafficking or cybersex dens which they know about. We then inform the police, social services, and the anti-trafficking investigators. Since trafficking starts in the community we consider that it is fundamental that the community can identify and understand it.

6. Our Ventures for Freedom community programme has now been running for 3 years. We started this programme as we realised that it was not enough to just do rescue operations. We also started advocating for new laws, to change the fact that humans were our biggest export.
7. As one of our core programmes Voice of the Free operates and provides a number of safe houses and shelters to house trafficking victims who are on the way to healing, economic empowerment, prosecution of their abusers and re-integration to mainstream society. We help children to recuperate their childhoods. We have shelters in transit areas; near airports, ports and train stations, where our specialist team identifies women and children who are suspected victims of trafficking. These shelters are located, for example, near the international airport of Manila.

8. We also have more long-term shelters which are in undisclosed locations since these are safe houses for women and children who have been rescued from traffickers. We have assisted thousands of victims who have been intercepted in transit, in ports and near the airport. We work closely with anti-trafficking task forces in the country and the police to rescue children.

9. In terms of international trafficking, our experience is that about 40% of the victims who we identify are children. We collaborate with law enforcement to rescue girls. We also work with boat and bus companies that transport the victims: we have trained the staff of port authorities and shipping corporations to identify red flags and to report suspected victims on board.

10. With this model, we intercept women and children on the ships before they get lost and before they are exploited further in cities such as Manila. These interception operations save lives but they are also dangerous, because traffickers can be violent.

11. Our anti-trafficking strategies are now in force at eight major seaports and three airports, in partnership with 52 inter-island shippers, two airlines and 2,000 bus companies.
Foreign Perpetrators

12. When foreign men are seen in the red light districts, this is because they have come to the country to buy sex from women and children. There are about 100,000 children working in the industry and we believe that it is the tip of the iceberg. It is a criminal enterprise.

Online Sexual Exploitation

13. The trafficking of women and children, including internal trafficking, has started to move online. Some estimates consider that 80% of the victims of online trafficking in the Philippines are under 18 years old. There are cyber sex dens around the Philippines meaning that this is very difficult to police.

14. Cyber sex dens or the exploitation of children online is a major and growing problem. Children are exploited online and “perform” to “customers” who pay money. Many of the perpetrators of the abuse live abroad in countries such as Australia, Sweden, Denmark, the US and the UK. They make payments via Western Union or other payment centres. One of the ways in which this online abuse functions is that children are paid for removing their clothing. There is a misconception in some parts of society that if the child has not been physically abused, then this is not “real” abuse. But the child is being sexually exploited.

15. One of the survivors under our care narrated that she has a customer, a man from UK who introduced himself to be about 60 years old and a pilot. She described the man to be 60 years old, and rich by the look of his house which he lets her see from his laptop. It started from chatting and performing online. The same man came also to the Philippines for one time to be with her and for actual sexual services. The survivor has forgotten the name of the UK National.
16. Sometimes it is difficult to identify the trafficker since the abuse is being carried out within the family. For example, parents say that their children are not really abused since it is happening online. Sometimes we have seen cases where children have been pushed by their parents to perform online. A major problem in this regard is poverty, and in other cases young people are victimised because of the desire to bring their families out of poverty.

17. From the experiences of girls in our care, we know that this online abuse often moves to physical sexual exploitation online by traffickers in cybersex dens, or in more traditional exploitation settings. In other words, while the abuse may start out over the internet, this becomes physical. In some cases, a foreign national directs the physical abuse from a different location which is performed online. In other cases, the foreign national arranges to come to the Philippines to abuse the child. This is arranged directly with the person who is arranging the online abuse. The trafficker as we call them will help the foreigner arrange accommodation, and everything for their visit to the Philippines. This means that the abuser is able to navigate and visit remote areas easily.

18. We know from the reports of the girls, that customers are frequently foreign. This has included perpetrators from the US, Sweden, the UK and Australia. We are also aware of one case where a man from the UK began to abuse a 12 year old girl online. She is now 22 years old, but we do not know what happened to the man. We rescued three girls under the age of 12 who were exploited online by an American man who described being forced to perform horrific acts. Our Executive Director, has previously stated that there is more to be done around the world on this issue. She has said that: “If the demand side is not addressed, trafficking will continue. We want to send a message that even if you’re in another part of the world, you can’t abuse our girls. In
the privacy of your room, on the internet, you’re still virtually raping our girls.”

19. We work with children who are rescued by law enforcement from these types of situations. In other cases, the girls in our shelters have escaped from cybersex dens. Cybersex abuse is a growing problem since anyone can operate this type of operation at a low cost. There is poor regulation of this type of activity.

Trauma

20. The conditions to which the children are subjected to are appalling. The traffickers do not care about the children. They put them in a room, sometimes they are drugged and they are subject to inhumane situations at the hands of their oppressors.

21. Through our protective and rescue work, we understand that victims of this form of abuse suffer psychological harm and trauma. Victims have very low self-esteem when they realise that there are nude photos on the internet. Children and young people become extremely worried that their peers or others in the community will recognise them and find out. They are worried about the social stigma. Some victims also suffer from physical injuries, including from STDs. Children suffer a deep trauma from the sexual exploitation. They are afraid that the trafficker will come again. More information can be found on our work in our annual reports [SI/2].

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1 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/visayan-forum-foundation-cecilia-trafficking-philippines_us_57470cabe4b03ede4413fb25
Statement of truth:
I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed: (S) DPA M. Loseño

Dated: 12.21.2018