

# Combatting Human Trafficking in the Philippines...One Life at a Time

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## Location and Contextual Information

My global independent study took place in Cebu, Philippines. I was based in Cebu City, which is one of the largest cities in the Philippines. Cebu City is located on the island of Cebu, which is centrally located amongst the 7,000 plus islands that make up the Philippines.

It is difficult to accurately calculate statistics around trafficking due to the transient and secretive nature of trafficking, various definitions related to trafficking terms, and a lack of central reporting and documenting agency.

The Philippines is considered to be primarily a source country for trafficking, but is also a transit and destination country for trafficking as well.

- Source: The country where people are found or recruited for trafficking purposes.
- Transit: People are moved through this country to get to their final destination.
- Destination: The country that receives people. It is the final location where people are moved.

The most common types of trafficking to occur in the Philippines are forced labor and sexual abuse.



An iSpeak community training about human trafficking in a local barangay (neighborhood community).

## Project Overview

### Description

My hope for this Global Independent Study was that I would have the opportunity to practice cultural humility, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills all the while gaining an understanding of what social work looks like in a global context. It was hoped that by dialoging with and observing the clinical team at My Refuge House (MRH) that I would better understand the global role of social workers and the best practices for residential care with survivors of trafficking.

### Agency/Community Partners

My Refuge House is an organization that is working to restore survivors of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation and abuse. My Refuge House's motto is "restoration...one life at a time." Their framework of care includes prevention, therapeutic care, and reintegration.

- Prevention: My Refuge House's prevention initiative is called iSpeak. iSpeak's workers facilitate community education and training programs around human trafficking all over the Philippines.
- Therapeutic Care: My Refuge House operates a residential shelter that cares for eighteen girls between the ages of 10 and 18. The girls go to school on site in addition to receiving counseling, group therapy, and provision of all basic needs..
- Reintegration: My Refuge House supports girls in their transition and reintegration after leaving the shelter for up to three years after their transition from the shelter to their community.

### Outcomes

- Before leaving for the Philippines, I completed an Annotated Bibliography, focusing on the current state of human trafficking in the Philippines, ideas for intervention, and the role of social workers when working with survivors of trafficking.
- While I was at My Refuge House, I met with multiple staff members to discuss their work at My Refuge House and to learn about their roles. There were many conversations about why the MRH staff feels their model is effective for the girls and what makes their model unique. I shadowed several members of the clinical team to see their role within the agency.
- Additionally, during my time at My Refuge House, I facilitated different experiential activities for the girls, designed to challenge them individually and build them as a community.
- I also worked with the on-site social worker to plan their group therapy program. This involved brainstorming discussion questions and activities for each topic. I compiled this information into a manual that the social worker can use when planning future group therapy sessions.

## Classroom Connections

- Adventure and Experiential Social Work Practice (SW 715): This course taught me about the importance of purpose and processing when facilitating experiential activities.
- Social Work Interventions with Children and Youth (SW 696): This course taught me about different attachment theory based practices that are so important for residential care.
- Current Treatments with Trauma Survivors (SW 790): This course taught me about the importance of safety and stabilization when working with survivors of trauma.
- Adolescent Development (SW 601): This course was helpful for me when working with the social worker to brainstorm and develop the group therapy manual because it helped us brainstorm content and topics that are relevant to adolescents and their development.
- Social Work and Spirituality (SW 713): My Refuge House is a Christian residential home, so it was inspiring to see social workers incorporate their spirituality into their practice, something that this course focused on.

## Skills Utilized

- Relationship building and interpersonal skills (active listening, summarizing, reflective listening) when dialoging with MRH staff, the MRH girls, and community members met on outreaches and family visits.
- Facilitating experiential activities for the MRH girls.
- Understanding of group dynamics when participating in meetings and facilitating group activities.
- Self reflection and examination of my own personal beliefs and biases.

## Career Connections

Trafficking is something that affects people all over the world. I am not sure if trafficking will be my career trajectory, but I have a strong passion for working with youth and moms and their young children, two populations that are very vulnerable to trafficking. I know then that in some capacity, trafficking will always be something that I could come across.

After spending three weeks at MRH, I learned so much about working with passion and letting your purpose inform your work. I left MRH refreshed and refueled, knowing that I want to be a social worker who truly loves her job as much as the social workers at MRH. The MRH agency culture of social work that promotes self care and spirituality, will be something that I will look for in future agencies.



## Lessons Learned

- It is alright to ask questions and to wrestle with things. It is how we learn and how we grow!
- We have to give people the platform and the space to be empowered. As social workers, we can create those spaces to empower others.
- Nature and the environment around you can be a positive force in someone's own healing.
- Care and compassion can be communicated across language barriers.

## Advice

- Research your host country and the issue you are focusing on before going so that you have some historical and cultural context of the issue.
- Be ready to be uncomfortable. "Being uncomfortable" can take on many different forms, but if you already have a mindset that you are ready to be challenged and grow, then being uncomfortable won't feel as uncomfortable!
- Be open, honest, and extend grace when people ask you questions about your life.
- Be comfortable with laughing at yourself or be willing to laugh along with others!
- Have a plan in place as to what you will do for your own self care while you are abroad.

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