

book review*WEDPRO's Halfway Through the Circle*

Reviewed by Andrea Burris

Prostitutes. We hear a lot about them, their industry, their supposed lifestyles, the risks they bear, and their morality. Yet very rarely do we learn about the facts of prostitution as it affects the sex worker. *Halfway Through the Circle* attempts to give its readers intimate perspectives of the sex trade through eight women who at some point in their lives became insiders. The effect is one that enlightens readers and makes them question their own misinformed notions of the sex trade.

Of the eight women in the book, only one managed to escape prostitution. Some of them knew what they were getting into, while others had no previous notion about what they would be forced to do. Although their backgrounds varied, it was always money that led them down the road of the sex worker. Just one syndicate deceived three of the women, Fe, Mary Ann, and Maricar, who were driven by the prospect of better pay overseas. Of all the stories, theirs, perhaps, invoke the most pathos. They were all unworldly young virgins who came from poor, religious families

and were put in the same horrifying, dehumanising condition of literal slavery in Nigeria. Like the other women who told their stories, none of them had fully recovered at the time the book was written, and one gets the feeling that the taboos and deep-rooted sense of guilt that culture has ingrained in them will probably never allow this anyway. Only Maricar refused to take on the guilt and one is inclined to applaud her, even though she still has issues with her sexuality.

Two other women who also re-

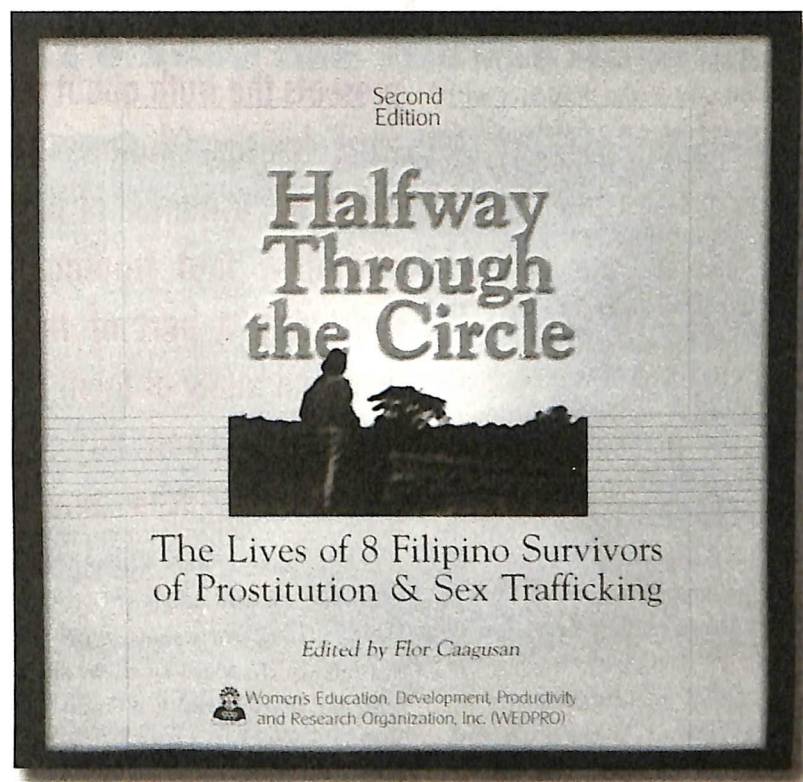
fused guilt stand out for their lucidity about their lives. Janet and Violy were presented with opportunities to get out but didn't, and they managed to use the industry for their own ends rather than allowing it to fully exploit them. Their stories demand respect from the reader—because they do not make excuses but give honest, valid reasons for the decisions they made. Also, they have taken charge of their lives and are in control of their own destinies, yet they do not glorify the sex industry. That they do not want their children to follow in their footsteps indicates that they are aware of the realities of prostitution.

One story stands out as truly triumphant in that the victim had overcome her shame and was, by the time her story was told, trying to enter a career as a translator for the Japanese Embassy. Myrna, whose harrowing experiences in Japan include escaping several attempts on her life, not only lived to tell the tale but also acquired something positive out of her experience. She made good friends with some heroic Japanese who aided in her escape, and was even motivated to use her encounter with the Japanese language to her own advantage.

Then there's Lenny who says her "life has been like what you see in the

movies.” Drawn by the promise of overseas employment, she joins an insidious cult that takes her to Korea to be married to a violent man who uses her for free labour and sex. Her story is similar in many ways to Fe, Mary Ann, and Maricar’s. Like them, it was an ostensibly respectable organisation that lured her into eventual sex slavery; it was also corruption that abetted in her being kept under intolerable conditions, and in the end, that denied her justice.

The only story that does not intuitively fit in the book is Edna’s, mainly because she wasn’t recruited for sex and she managed to escape several attempts on her person. There never was a risk of her becoming a prostitute because she was employed as a domestic helper. Whether or not her employer “trafficked” her for sex is also unclear. Apart from casting light on the risks of being an overseas worker, there seems to be little reason for including her story in the collection. That she was able to resist her two employers’ sexual advances may also lead the reader to miss the point and think that because in this one case, since the woman was able to choose not to participate in her exploitation, the others have the same choice too. It is not clear what the reader is supposed to get out of Edna’s story. It would have been better to include a story about someone who was “born into it,” so to speak, since it is not uncommon for the child of a prostitute to end up following in her mother’s footsteps. One wonders why such an important perspective was left out.



Another weakness in the book is that some things might have been lost in the translation, as much of the narratives are in the third person, with bits that are in Tagalog and then translated into English. Even as a non-native Tagalog speaker, I sensed the Tagalog sentences were more powerful. The third-person narrative also adds another level of detachment for the reader. Although well written and engaging, the stories do not necessarily stir indignation in the reader. It might have been more effective if the narratives were presented in the first person to give the reader the feeling s/he is getting the story “straight from the horse’s mouth.”

Whether the reader feels indignation might also depend on how s/he approaches the issues raised in the book. If s/he comes from a permissive culture where there is less value placed on virginity, then it might be more difficult to understand the guilt the women suffer. S/he may also feel that culture is in a large part responsible for the women’s continued suffering even though they have fled their situations. The indignation might be at the tyranny of a culture that pins guilt on the victim. The reader should also keep in mind that although her culture may be particularly hard for Filipina survivors, because of their religious upbringing, this has also helped many of them to cope through faith and prayer.

The subject matter is a difficult one, and the editors did well not to overnarrate, as is the tendency with biographies where too much analysis takes place. The reader is simply presented with the facts and invited to come to their own conclusion. Prostitution is, after all, a contentious issue. Each person's view of it depends on one's upbringing and understanding of it. There is often too much judgment accompanied by too little understanding. The complexity of the issue means one has to suspend judgment, because each time a statement is made, a contradictory example comes up. It is better to let readers draw their own conclusions.

The book presents the human face of prostitutes. All too often, they are not seen as people. I attended a gender training seminar once where participants were asked to list places that only men, not women, visit. One of these places mentioned was the red-light district. My immediate reaction was: "What about all the women who work there?" Although the answer was justifiable, it also reveals an underlying assumption about prostitutes—that they are a different class of women, or that they are not really considered persons. When a man visits a prostitute, he is purchasing a commodity. That the commodity has a face, a past and emotions is often ignored.

Halfway Through the Circle is an important book in that it reveals the souls of these women. It helps read-

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ers realise that women who enter the industry are not born prostitutes. Each of the women showed promise in their youth. Many of them are intelligent, hardworking women who simply wanted to provide for their families. As we read their stories and discover their personalities, they become familiar to us, they remind us of certain people we know who are not prostitutes, they might even remind us of ourselves. We can relate and meet them halfway.

Every now and then, a book comes along which makes readers think twice about their assumptions. *Halfway Through the Circle* is such a book. It challenges many of the misconceptions surrounding prostitution—that only a certain type of 'bad' women become prostitutes, that women who become prostitutes enjoy it, that women who become prostitutes do it because they are too lazy to get a proper job, etc. The book presents the truth about sex work for

the Filipina—that many are ashamed of their sexuality; that trauma is constantly a part of their lives and many of them are guilt-ridden; and that the job is a dangerous one.

Halfway Through the Circle has the potential to be a powerful book. How much it achieves depends on circulation, and what its readers do with the information they are presented with. It is an easy read that is both entertaining and informative, and the stories are gripping. We see the best and worst in humanity as we read about how greed, lust and jealousy made victims of innocent women while fraternity, generosity and compassion helped them cope. The book lifts the shroud off a rampant but hidden culture, de-stigmatising prostitutes as it does so. It is an essential read for men and women who have ever thought of the subject. ☺

Andrea Burris was born in Singapore, and moved to Australia with her family when she was 11. She completed Bachelor of Arts in English and Philosophy at the University of Wollongong in Australia, and then Master of Arts in International Relations at the University of New South Wales, also in Australia. Together with husband Phil, Andrea works for Australian Volunteers International. She is now connected with Asian Women in Co-operative Development Forum in a communications/advocacy capacity, specialising in international trade and development, including the issue of illegal trade in services such as sex trafficking.