

FORCED LABOUR STORIES

BIANCA

Bianca and her baby Anne-Marie are lucky to be alive. They live in Romania's first shelter for trafficked women. The shelter, which is called Reaching Out, takes care of women who have managed to get out of the kind of forced labour that is linked to trafficking.

Traffickers transport people away from their homes, often to another country, with promises of jobs or papers that will allow them to work abroad. Sometimes traffickers kidnap their victims. Once they are in the hands of the traffickers, people can be bought and sold. They are often forced into dangerous work. This is the way that many women and young girls end up in prostitution. Trafficked people can be threatened with violence if they try to get away. The traffickers also often take away their passports to make escape more difficult.

Although it is impossible to be certain about the numbers of people involved, an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 women and children are trafficked from Eastern Europe to Western Europe each year.

Bianca was taken from Romania at the age of 16 and ended up in Macedonia. In between she was sold five times. She worked for a year as a prostitute behind locked doors and barred windows. When she became pregnant, the men who were holding her told her to kill herself. He even gave her the knife to use. A friend convinced her not to do it and she managed to escape.

Bianca was eight months pregnant when she came to the centre. She hardly said a word, according to Iana Matei who is president of Reaching Out. Bianca went for four months without smiling or laughing. She had nightmares. But once Bianca had her baby and began to take care of little Anne-Marie, she gained confidence. Now she has really blossomed, Iana Matei says.

KUKU LAL CHAUDHARY

Mr. Kuku is between 30 and 35 years old (he does not know his exact age) and worked as a bonded labourer for more than half his life. Bonded labour is a system found in some Asian countries under which people work to pay off a debt. It is considered a form of forced labour, because workers are not free to leave their employer. They work under harsh conditions and can be tricked into working for long after their debt has been paid off.

Countries such as India, Pakistan and Nepal are attempting to eliminate bonded labour. In Nepal, where Mr. Kuku lives, the government announced in July 2000 that bonded labourers known as "kamaiyas" should be freed. Mr. Kuku left bonded labour just a month before the government's decision.

Under the kamaiya system, workers agree to work for a landlord for one year. Most kamaiyas are paid in food or other basic items, rather than money. The food they are paid in often comes from the very fields that they work on. But kamaiyas don't usually receive enough to live on, they are often forced to borrow from the landlords, or employers, and pay back these loans through work. Like other bonded labourers, this causes a vicious circle of debt and poverty that is passed from one generation to the other. Although in principle a kamaiya is free to change employers at the end of the year, a kamaiya who has a debt can only do this if the new employer pays off his debt. Therefore it is almost as if kamaiyas are sold from one employer to another.

Like many others, Mr. Kuku became a bonded labourer because of poverty. Although his grandparents owned land, when it was divided between Mr. Kuku's father and his eight brothers, each one got a very small piece to farm. This then had to be divided again between Mr. Kuku and his three brothers, which did not leave enough land to earn a living.

As a result, Mr. Kuku's family had to borrow money to pay for everyday expenses. To repay this, Mr. Kuku went into bonded labour at the age of 14. He had to work almost 16 hours a day starting at 4 in the morning. When he had his own children, Mr. Kuku agreed to let them work for his employer, but they did not receive any payment, only meals.

Mr. Kuku did not know that the government was about to outlaw the kamaiya system when he quit bonded labour. The government decision, however, meant that he could not be forced to return to his employer.

Now Mr. Kuku is pulling a rickshaw in Nepalganj and earns the equivalent of about \$40 a month. This income has encouraged Mr. Kuku to send his children to school, because he doesn't want them to suffer as he did from lack of education. (Mr. Kuku can only write his own name.) Mr. Kuku and his wife have two boys and three girls.