

*Alexia was trafficked through Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, and now works in Venezuela with an organization that helps women to escape from sex slavery. She narrated her story in 1999.*

Alexia

When I was a child, I didn't have a family. I never knew who my father was, and my mother died when I was still a little girl. I had no one to care for me—to raise and love me

I started to be used in prostitution when I was still a girl. The first time, a man raped me. When I was 14, I escaped prostitution when a man married me. I had a son with him, and I divorced him two years later. I had no other choices, so I returned to prostitution to get money to support my son. Things happened very quickly.

Later, I was living with another man, as my partner. He was unfaithful to me, so I left and ended up in prostitution again. I didn't become involved in that by myself. I was led there. I don't believe anyone gets into prostitution by herself.

I worked for many years in very unpalatable conditions. Nobody in my family—my kids, no one—knew what I did. I had to do this to survive. I had to sacrifice myself. What I did, I did for my children. I have lived in the same place for 24 years, and no one knows anything about this. No one associated with the prostitution knows my real name. We always use different names. I am the sort of person who is very private. I don't have many friendships. If anyone said to one of my friends that I was in prostitution, they would say they didn't believe it.

I was trafficked, too. I was trafficked to Trinidad and Tobago. The clients in Trinidad and Tobago were of Indian descent and Chinese. I got into this through a man who used to go to different places where the women were in prostitution, and ask,

“Would you like to go to Trinidad and Tobago? Who wants to go?” On one occasion, I said, “I want to go.” The man who arranged all this charged each girl around 6000 Bolivares. After a week’s work we were expected to pay him this amount. Around ten of us from the Dominican Republic, Columbia and Venezuela would gather in Carupano, a port city in Venezuela. We were transported by sea in a little boat to Trinidad under very dangerous conditions. There was always the risk that the boat would capsize. We went without legal documents. We were allowed to take only our handbags. If we were caught by immigration, we would be taken to prison and remain there for five, six months. When we arrived, we were taken to an apartment, which belonged to the man who did the negotiation. We were forced to work everyday whether we were ill or not, whether we had our menstrual periods or not. I was trying to save money to buy an apartment, but when I returned to Venezuela, the customs officials took all the money in foreign currencies—dollars and Caribbean dollars—leaving me with only a few Bolivares.

I needed more money to live with my son, so I accepted an invitation from a Venezuelan pimp to go to the Dominican Republic. A friend took care of my son while I was away. He gave me an airline ticket and a passport to go to Puerto Plata for nine months. We were forced to work every day whether we were ill or not. Although prostitution in the Dominican Republic is illegal, many underground situations exist.

In Venezuela there is a great problem with how the police treat women in prostitution. The police can come whenever they want to places where we are working, demanding to see our papers. The way they treat us is horrendous. Even when we had ID cards and all our papers in order, we were taken to prison and had to pay a certain amount

of money to be let free. If a girl didn't have papers or her papers were out of date, it was very likely that she'd be raped.

I know of case of a *campaniera* who worked with me. One day, on a Sunday morning, we exchanged greetings and said, "Goodbye, see you later." On Monday, the headlines in the newspaper said that the body of a girl had been found in the Guerre River. They identified her as a woman who sold imported clothing. We were totally unaware that it was our *campaniera* who had been killed, and the investigation continued to be carried out. On Tuesday, the police arrived at our place of work, and ordered all of us downstairs. They began to ask questions and showed us pictures. Suddenly, we realized that the murdered woman was our *campaniera*. The inquiry continued for about two weeks. Each day, for 15 days, they would come and question us. Supposedly, our *campaniera* was waiting for a taxi at 12 o'clock at night when she left work. The last time that she was seen was when she called on the cops. The next day her belongings had disappeared, and she was naked. And when the police went to her room, where she lived, they found a policeman's uniform belonging to her boyfriend.

We surmised that she was beaten up, and then thrown into the river while she was still alive. She died there. The police were confronted with a very unpalatable situation. The chief of police did not want to admit that one of the police had actually been involved in this case because it was a prostitute woman who had been killed. Journalists bombarded the chief of police, and he had to admit the truth. He didn't want anybody to know, particularly her family, her sisters, and so on.

In the end we still don't know what happened to her. There are rumors that the police killed her. This is the way it goes when we talk about victims, about women in prostitution.

I was in prostitution for about 20 years. Then I came across a Sister from the Good Shepherd community who was also there. And I became involved in training programs that they had—beauty training, sewing, and embroidery, and others that they offer. I followed the whole gamut of programs that they offer, and became a graduate of those programs. I also met a very good man who I married. I'm glad I left prostitution. I left behind all the problems that I had to confront with the police and the beatings by the owners of the different businesses. It was such a horrendous experience—too much, too much.

After my own experiences in prostitution, I want to ensure that all women can get out of that situation. My experience of 20 years in prostitution is something that I don't want for anybody. What was most beneficial to me in getting out of prostitution was to become involved in the programs offered by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd Community. They helped me a great deal and enabled me to get out. The way the sisters used to deal with me, they used say, "Alexia, you're not cut out for this sort of work. You don't belong to that work." And I was saying to myself, "I have two children, there is something that I need to do for them." Finally, I wanted to leave, and I left.

I want to say that even though I was part of this world I never smoked. I hated drugs. I never became involved with alcohol. I was able to bear it because of my children, because of my family.

Prostitution should never be legalized. Can you imagine if it becomes legalized? Everything will be chaos. Labor laws in Venezuela allow for minors to work with parental permission. At the moment we have an avenue, LaCuña Avenue, in Venezuela where you can see young girls of 13, 14 years of age, soliciting. It is a disaster.