

The Breadwinner shares untold stories of 200 poor Sri Lankan women that either spent years working as housemaids in the Middle East or were in the process of preparing to leave their families for employment. If these unskilled, uneducated women returned intact, they often carried memories of abuse, abortion, trafficking, torture, rape and murder.

the breadwinner

**stories of women forced into
modern-day slavery and trafficking**

by sriyani tidball

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Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Proverbs 31:8 -9

Indu's Story

I will never forget the day I first met Indu. It was a late Friday morning and we had just finished our weekly staff meeting at Community Concern; I was feeling quite inspired as we had saved a few kids from bad situations. When I stepped outside, there was a young woman who looked more like a teenager with two little daughters. One was a toddler and the other a nursing infant. She was exhausted, and tears filled her eyes as she came into our building and shared her story.

When I was 14, I lost my 42-year-old mom. She over-dosed herself with medications and committed suicide. That was a tough time for me as my two older sisters, 19 and 22, had gotten married and left home, and my 16-year old brother and I were attending school. The only love I had in my life was my mom, but she was always hurting, sad, kind and needy. We were close. She was my best friend.

My mom had an awful married life and domestic violence was all she knew. The pressure of being physically abused every day was difficult for all of us to handle and the pressure was getting too much for her. My dad was a wicked man and he got drunk every night on the local brew, kassipu, a moonshine liquor brewed illegally and sold cheap mostly to addicts. Every single day he came home drunk. He staggered home, but he had the energy to lash into her and beat her up. It did not matter if she waited for my dad to eat the dinner she made for him, or if she ate her meal without him, both options deserved a severe beating. No matter what happened, when he got home every night, she was going to get a beating of her life, right in front of me. There was screaming and shouting and then finally my mom was beaten to a pulp and sobbing. Sometimes she would pass out. I was so sad when she died but I also knew at least she

was not going to get beaten anymore. There was a sense of relief, but this was my only friend - she was no more.

My dad was a drunkard from the day I could remember him. We were all scared of him for none of us wanted to get beaten by him. He kept all his violent physical abuse for our mom, who was a small-framed, frail woman who tried her best to be a good wife and a mother. As she got a bit older, she came down with some stress and high blood pressure and was heavily medicated. Finally, she took all her pills and left this earth for a better after-life. My mom killed herself, leaving her distraught children to fend for themselves.

My dad did not have a real job, so finances were scarce, even though he had money to buy his daily brew. After my mom died, we were forced to pick tea from the adjoining property after school and all the small change my brother and I collected had to be given to my dad, so he had money to buy his daily moon-shine. One day I got stung badly by some honeybees on the tea plantation and reacted badly. I needed medical attention. My late mother's sister came over and picked me up and took me to live with her. She lived quite far from where I was living so I had to change schools.

I was full of hope that maybe my life would be better as now I had a safe place to live; I did not have to pick tea and could study. The best part of staying with my aunt was I had regular meals, something that was not a part of my life after my mom passed. But the good life only lasted a few weeks. My aunt started to make me do housework and soon I had to do all the cooking and cleaning. I had become the family slave. Things got worse. I was not given meals and sometimes kept back from school as I had housework to do. Soon I got sick and my aunt sent me back home. I was relieved to get back home, as I was weary and weak, but things at home had not changed and I had walked back into the same life I was trying to get out of.

The next week my oldest sister came to see me and decided I should come back with her and live at her place. I was so glad to get out of my house, so I willingly left my drunken dad and brother. My sister promised to let me go to school, in return I had to help her around the house and help her with her baby. I stayed with her for over a year, but my life had become that of being her personal slave. I had been forced to drop out of school and had to take care of her two toddlers and cook and clean her house. Each day I woke up early and went to bed late. In the middle of all of this I did sit for my O levels and actually got through the exam except I did fail in mathematics, as I had hardly ever gone to school. My second older sister needed help as she just had her first baby and I was given to my other sister to be her housemaid. My payment for being the housemaid for my sisters was just a place to lay my head and some food and I was barely 16 years old. As I was promised that I could do my A Levels and go to school, I moved to my other sister's house as their housemaid. This ended up being a bad experience too, more like from the frying pan into the fire, as my sister demanded a lot more work from me. I got weary, sickly and weak again, so they dumped me back with my father who was now more addicted than ever to his kassipu.

One day my dad told me that he had arranged a marriage for me, even though I was only 16 and I wanted to further my education. I met the man who was to be my husband, and he seemed nice, but he was 12 years older than I. My life was so miserable and could not get worse, so I accepted the hand dealt to me. He made me many promises and I was married right away. I was then taken to his parent's house to live. I was just a vulnerable teenage girl who had seen and experienced much abuse and was looking for love. I thought this was going to be my new life; two new parents, a real home, and a kind husband. Once again this was a short-lived dream, and my hope got deferred fast. I found out that my husband's real work was making moonshine. He supplied my dad with all the moonshine

he ever needed, which was the price he sold me for. I had been sold and trafficked by my dad.

About two months into my marriage, his mother mentioned that my husband had children from a previous marriage. I was shocked - three young children I had never heard about. I was surprised as this was something that never came up in conversation. Soon the three children arrived, and I found out that besides being pregnant, I also had three children to take care of for they were now my three children. My father was content with the arrangement as he had his addiction taken care of and my sisters were too busy to ever contact me and I just gave birth to a baby girl.

Things started to change in my home. My husband started to remind me of my dad. He started to beat me up whenever he pleased, which was very often. His parents were scared to intervene for he would beat them too. He was a violent man and very unreasonable. One time he beat me up so badly that I actually went to the police to make a written police entry of domestic violence and abuse. After taking the entry the policeman told me that he thought domestic problems should be dealt with at home. But I was so afraid that my husband would beat me and kill me that I kept going back to the police at least once a month and making a written police entry. I filed complaints in my local police station 17 times, and one complaint was when he had beaten me up and broken my arm and did not take me to the hospital. It never set back into place and finally healed, crooked. By now I had given birth to a second little girl and at 21 had five children to care for, aging parents-in-law and a husband whose only promise I could count on was a beating every night. I thought of my mom and really started to feel desperate and depressed. Would I end my life too? I was tempted many times but seeing my two infants, I could not do what my mom did to me.

My husband became very suspicious of me. He would often get angry if the men who came to buy moonshine talked to me or even looked at me. This was another reason he justified beating me. One day, about three years into my marriage, my husband informed me that he had been married to another woman. She was coming home from the Middle East where she had been a housemaid for the past five years and wanted me out of his life forever. I was shocked, scared and did not know what to say. He then kicked me and my two little daughters, who at that time were two years, and six-months old, out of the house along with our clothes. He told me never to show my face again, as his real wife was coming back home from the Middle East and she knew nothing about me. I had heard of stories where women go to the Middle East to help their families, and while they were away their husbands find temporary wives, and I never knew I was my husband's temporary wife. He was screaming at me and I knew I had no choice, he wanted me gone right away. It did not matter that I was helpless, that I was homeless, that this was my only family and that I had a two very small children. He was chasing me away.

I picked up my stuff and walked away, got into a bus to go into the big city of Colombo. I arrived at the bus depot in Colombo and was sitting on the ground with my two small children and this kind old man came and asked me if I needed help. I was scared and said, "No." He did these two more times, and then he said to me, "I know you need help and I can take you where you can get some help." By then I was in tears and had no idea what I could do. I followed him and he took me by bus to Dehiwela and left me outside the doors of this building. He asked me to wait there for help. So here I am, and can you please help us.

The project staff at Community Concern live for days like this where they really can help someone like Indu. Soon they were talking to her, giving her ginger tea and some food, and making plans to get her to a safe shelter.

Here was Indu with her two little infants under three, homeless and helpless and we had no place to keep her. We had Power House, a residential care for heroin addicts; we had Lotus Buds, our children's home for 22 orphaned children; and the rest of our programs were day programs, for those folks had homes to go to. So, I called a close school friend of mine, Niri Malasekera, who was on the Board of Women in Need (WIN), a shelter for women dealing with domestic violence. They took Indu and her babies, Chamari and Bagiya, into their shelter.

Two months later, it was April, a time when everything in Sri Lanka closes down for the New Year for about two weeks. I had a call from the WIN office asking me to come and take my girl because their shelter was closing for the holidays. Suddenly, Indu was my girl? I was getting ready to go up to the hills for the break as it was really hot and that was what people in Colombo did. So, I went and picked her up with her two babies and enjoyed chatting with her about how much better and safer she felt. I dropped her off at one of the project staff's home and gave them some money for extra food and said I would be back in a few days after our family trip to the hills. I was feeling a little guilty that I had just dropped off "my girl." So, I went to the market and picked up a bunch of fruit and visited her the next morning to see her before we left on our vacation. To my amazement, the girl I went to see was a changed person. Just one night with a staffer, who just shared the love of Jesus with her, cared for her sincerely had totally changed Indu.

Indu was happy to see me. She explained to me that she had a spiritual experience that totally changed her and had been invited by the staffer and his family to live with them. She wanted me to let her stay there and with her lovely smile convinced me she was OK.

Indu's life truly had changed that day.

It was this incident that spurred us to finally open our own shelter for victims of domestic violence, homelessness and trafficking, and Indu was a victim of all three. She was our first resident. We called our

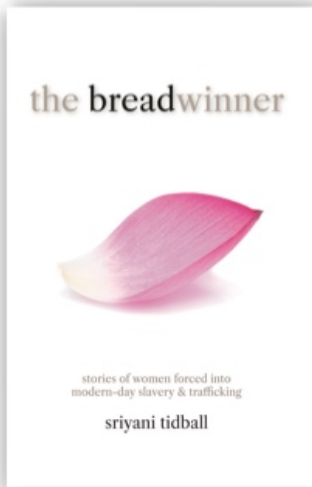
shelter Heavena, which in the local Sinhalese language means, shade, or for us it meant, “we will protect you.” We also wanted our home Heavena to be a place like Heaven on Earth.

It is about 15 years since Indu came into our lives. I see her many times a week for she works in our project, and her smile just lights up the place. She came to Community Concern and shared her story of abuse, homelessness, and being the forced sex-slave of a man, whose wife was slaving herself in the Middle East as a housemaid to help her family. It was a typical situation of what happens when women leave their families and migrate to the Middle East.

Indu completed her six months of healing and care at Heavena and started to be a live-in helper in the shelter. Two years later she moved into her own small home and Community Concern helped her to enroll in a Montessori Course of study where she became a qualified preschool teacher. She was able to get her daughters into a local school with a good educational reputation. They were exceptionally smart and Indu worked with their studies every day and a private Catholic school, Holy Family Convent, gave the two girls a full scholarship for their entire education. Fifteen years later, the two girls got glowing results in their O levels and they are now studying for their A Levels and planning on going to University one day. As for Indu, she works at the Community Concern preschool, *Tiny Stars* and keeps that smile on her face. She spends her days helping others less fortunate than herself. She has forgiven all those family members who hurt her and neglected her as a teenager. There isn't a bitter bone in her body. It is women like Indu that inspires me to keep on going for we can truly make a difference in someone's life if we are just willing to give some time, energy and love.

In the meantime, at Community Concern, my research into the lives of women going to the Middle East to be housemaids, inspired us to start a program where we give women low interest loans to start a home-based business, pay off loan sharks, or get skills training. We needed to find ways to help women make a better living in Sri Lanka than that

offered through leaving to go to the Middle East to join the housemaid industry. We also realized that if women decided they wanted to go, after counting the cost of what this would do to their family, we needed to give them tools to help prepare them to have a safe migration and a safer family left behind, unlike what happened to the legal wife of the man who had married Indu.



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