



sunday high school

## HOPE FOR THE CHILD DOMESTICS: RIGHTS EDUCATION IN A SUNDAY HIGH SCHOOL

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Eufrosina "Roni" Mines,  
principal of Sunday High  
School, Assumption  
College of Davao

After finishing Grade 6, Peejay Cabanilla left his village in Malalag, Davao del Sur to live with his aunt in the city. The aunt had promised to send him to high school, a favour Peejay appreciated profoundly. He did not mind doing the chores, cleaning the house, preparing the meals, doing the laundry and ironing. "Of course I didn't know then that I was already, essentially, a child domestic," he said. "I was just too grateful that my relatives were taking care of my further education."

But he was devastated when he learned that school was not a "regular school" but a Sunday high school. Peejay could not hide his disappointment on his first Sunday at the Assumption College of Davao, and when he got home, he asked his aunt whether the school was a real one. "Why are classes only on Sundays?" he asked.

Peejay eventually became comfortable with the set-up. The teachers were considerate, and the classes were productive. He soon discovered most of his classmates were like him — children beholden to the generosity of

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better-off relatives and consequently, working as domestics in their households. What clouded Peejay from realizing this immediately was that there was no prior arrangement of a fixed salary a formally employed worker is entitled to. Instead, his aunt gave him free room and board.

### Employment Pattern

“That is the usual pattern of the child domestics from the Visayas and Mindanao,” explains Eufrosina “Roni” Mines, principal of Assumption College of Davao’s Sunday High School programme. “They do not get recruited to Manila straightaway. They usually start as domestics in an extended family’s household.”

Domestic work per se is not among the worst forms of child labour identified in International Labour (ILO) Convention No. 182. The convention counts among the worst forms of child labour slavery, debt bondage, prostitution, pornography, forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict, use of children in drug trafficking and other illicit activities, and all other work harmful or hazardous to the health, safety or morals of girls and boys under 18 years of age. Both Canada and the Philippines have ratified ILO Convention 182.

According to UNICEF, however, the millions of children working as domestic servants and unpaid household help are especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.\*

The Sunday High School began as an outreach project of the Missionaries of the Assumption sisters in school year 1994-1995. Before this, the school had conducted mostly dole-out activities to the residents of Agdao, a poor district of Davao City. But the sisters wanted a more effective, and therefore lasting, contribution to the community. The congregation’s survey of Agdao’s residents revealed that the strategic assistance the school was in a position to provide is education to those forced out of school by poverty, especially the child domestics in the city.

Davao City, it should be noted, is the main jump-off point in Mindanao for both children and adults looking to escape the lack of opportunities at home and move to Manila.

A Sunday high school seemed to be the most feasible as the physical infrastructure — the school facilities — was already available. However, because the exact 10-month curriculum of a regular high school had to be



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Sunday High School students converse with a mother during a community-integration activity

\* In the Philippines, child labour is defined as the illegal employment of children below the age of 15 who are not directly under the sole responsibility of their parent or guardian, or whose work do not impair their normal development. Child labour also includes those children below the age of 18 who are employed in hazardous situations.

(L to R) Efren Pepito, Tata Aparra, Rose Rulos and Peejay Cabanilla, proud graduates of Sunday High School



collapsed into 42 Sunday sessions (whole day), different lesson plans and workbooks were needed. Canada Fund for Local Initiatives saw the social development potential of the project and supported the drafting of four workbooks, one per year level, which the teachers and students could use. The workbooks, in addition, promised to incorporate a gender consciousness.

“We didn’t know then that that was already gender sensitivity, of course. But I remember that we — the boys — had to do the same stuff as the girls, and vice versa,” Peejay recalls. “A boy classmate once asked our teacher why he also had to sew handbags that our girl classmates were assigned to do, and the teacher launched into a discourse on gender stereotypes.”

“We girls had difficulty with our woodworking classes,” says Tata Aparra, Peejay’s batchmate, “but we had to go through them anyway.”

“It’s tricky because when we assessed our effectiveness in 1997, we realized that we had crammed too much into the workbooks and these were too heavy. At the same time, though, you can’t go soft on the students just because they’re from Sunday high school,” Roni said.

From the 135 members of Peejay and Tata’s batch, enrolment is now nearly 2,800. Of these, 80 percent are girls, of whom an overwhelming majority are employed as child domestics. And, the wonder of a project such as Assumption College of Davao’s Sunday High School — at first blush purely altruistic — is that it is, in fact, profitable. Tuition is a monthly PhP285 (about Cdn\$7), or about PhP2,850 (Cdn\$70) a year. “Our teachers even prefer teaching in the Sunday high school because the hourly rate, work being on a Sunday, is slightly higher,” Roni pointed out. The Sunday high school now contributes to the maintenance and capital equipment costs of the school in general.

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## Empowering Education

Every school year of the Sunday High School starts with an orientation on the situation of an estimated 300,000 child domestics in the Philippines. This is conducted by the Visayan Forum, a non-government organisation established for the protection of domestic workers and advocacy of their rights. The Visayan Forum has been a partner of Sunday High School from the outset. In fact, when the first principal of Sunday High School, Luzviminda “Luz” Panes, retired from the school, she joined Visayan Forum as a regional coordinator. She works with Peejay who, after graduation in 2000, also became a Visayan Forum staff.

“At first I would entice these students to attend the meetings with Visayan Forum with free snacks. But the cause has grown on them, obviously,” Luz said.

Assumption College of Davao — whether the regular or the Sunday high school — is also known for its activism. By word of mouth, the city learned that the education from Sunday High School is not only gender sensitive but socially responsible as well. “Before we even enrolled any student, together with Visayan Forum, we already conducted interviews not only with the child but also his or her parent or guardian or employer,” Roni said.

“We all know our domestic workers — especially child domestics — are frequently victims of abuse from their employers,” Luz said. “We were careful from the beginning that our students learned their rights, and especially their rights as child workers to sufficient time for rest and recreation.”

Rose Rulos and Efren Pepito from the second batch of Sunday High School students, for example, grew to understand Philippine social realities and problems more clearly. As a result, after graduation, the two decided on joining still a new outreach project of



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Preoccupied students during their laboratory class



Students under the glare of the sun in the schoolyard for a presentation

“We realized that we had crammed too much into the workbooks... At the same time, you can’t go soft on the students just because they’re from Sunday high school.”

Assumption College of Davao — as teachers of two extension schools for indigenous communities of Mindanao.

“It’s difficult because the classes are multi-level — you have a combination of students from different years in one classroom,” Efren said. “But it’s also very fulfilling. My parents once asked me when I would get a higher-paying job but when I explained my decision, they stopped asking.”

For Rose, her choice to be an extension school teacher stems, simply, from a desire to be of service.

Child domestic workers are among the most difficult to see and reach, as they are kept within the privacy of their employers’ homes. Majority of them are in exploited conditions. Many become victims of trafficking, or are bonded by debt to their employers. They have long working hours, with little opportunity for rest. Most of them are usual victims of verbal, physical and sexual abuse.

Peejay, Tata, Efren and Rose — they were child domestic workers from poor families who seemed locked to a difficult destiny. But the Sunday High School made the difference. Now they are gainfully employed in jobs that allow them to reach out to others. Sunday High School equipped them not only with basic education, but more important, with a deep consciousness of the role each one plays in social empowerment and development. Few other schools can top that.