

More Precious than Diamonds

Our Fight Against Human Trafficking and
Cybersex Crime in the Philippines



Captivating Philippines | July to December 2020

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Letter from the CEO

Dear Captivating Philippines supporters,

Wow, I'm really not sure how to start this 6 monthly update off to be honest. What a challenging period this has been. The Philippines, more than any other country we work in, has been the hardest hit in terms of prolonged lockdowns and disruptions as it tries to manage the issues surrounding COVID-19. It's been never-ending and we are seeing many in the Philippines losing heart. When you work in the anti-human trafficking, cybersex against children, and poverty reduction space, it's been tough to do our work these past 6 months. It's been physically impossible to reach our target market efficiently in groups or through schools.

Even our Manilla based partners, Honor 1000, have been unable to meet together as a team since things closed up 8 months ago. And, of course, those lowest in society have seen their businesses close, their children unable to attend school and income streams disappear. People still need to eat, and so starts the cycle of families making horrible decisions to generate cashflow. We are all praying that things start opening up again soon.

But, we have not lost hope. On the contrary, everyone is working hard around the obstacles to still reach the poor and destitute, and liberate the trapped and abused.

You will however read in this report how we are still progressing our three key program areas:

- aftercare support for victims of trafficking and, increasingly, child victims of online sexual abuse and exploitation at BLESSED HOUSE;
- education and awareness programs; and
- Microfinance programs aimed at bringing women (and their families) out of poverty.

We are still proud to be doing this work in partnership with two wonderful agencies (see diagram), with Captivating funding 100% of everything you read in this update (thanks to donors like you).

Our impact numbers, as expected, are down significantly on our original plans. We're disappointed about that, but know that as soon as lockdowns lift, we will be pushing hard to catch-up. All of our staff and partners took pay reductions during this period to ensure we could survive and live to fight another day - and come back hard. We did survive, and we will fight on.



While expansion plans were shelved, we instead focused on providing increased support to those currently in our care. With schools being shut, different strategies have been implemented in an attempt to reach children in their homes with messages of safety and carefulness. And our Blessed House program has started to morph more into aftercare and support for children rescued by police as victims of cybersex abuse - short-term care for as long as it takes to find foster-families to care for them longer term.

In fact, as I type this, five children are on their way to Blessed House as victims of online sexual abuse following a house raid by Philippine Police in Manilla. It's horrible business, but we are glad to be operating in this area to bring hope of a better tomorrow for these young lives.

Bottom line: we survived, we are stronger, wiser, leaner, and ready to fight for another day. Our 6 months ahead will be all about rebuilding.

So many need our help. Just like we need yours. We are all interdependent. Let's do this.

Andrew Colquhoun
CEO and Co-Founder | Captivating

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Pandemic's Rippling Effect

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed a lot of Filipino families to limits. Unfortunately for some, this meant resorting to illegal and exploitative practices just to survive.

In 2020, the Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLC) of the Philippines saw alarmingly increasing rates of suspicious transaction reports (STR) related to or suspected to be related to child pornography and online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC). Just for the first half of the year:

- STRs increased more than twice the number of total reported cases in 2019; and
- STRs related to child pornography amounted to PHP 113.1 million

The said reports, according to AMLC, were based on indicators and exchange of information with proper law enforcement agencies, financial intelligence units, and relevant private organizations.

Aside from Internet access and the level of proficiency of many Filipinos in the English language, the ease of access to money transferring services such as remittance centers and electronic wallets also contributed to the increase of online sexual exploitation cases.

Pampanga, which is one of the provinces where we conduct the Microfinance Program for women, was listed as the top city with the highest number - both in volume and value - of remittances related to child pornography.

Most of the time, the primary perpetrators of OSAEC are the biological parents (41%), immediate family members or relatives (42%), or adults acquainted with the child or living in the same community as the child.

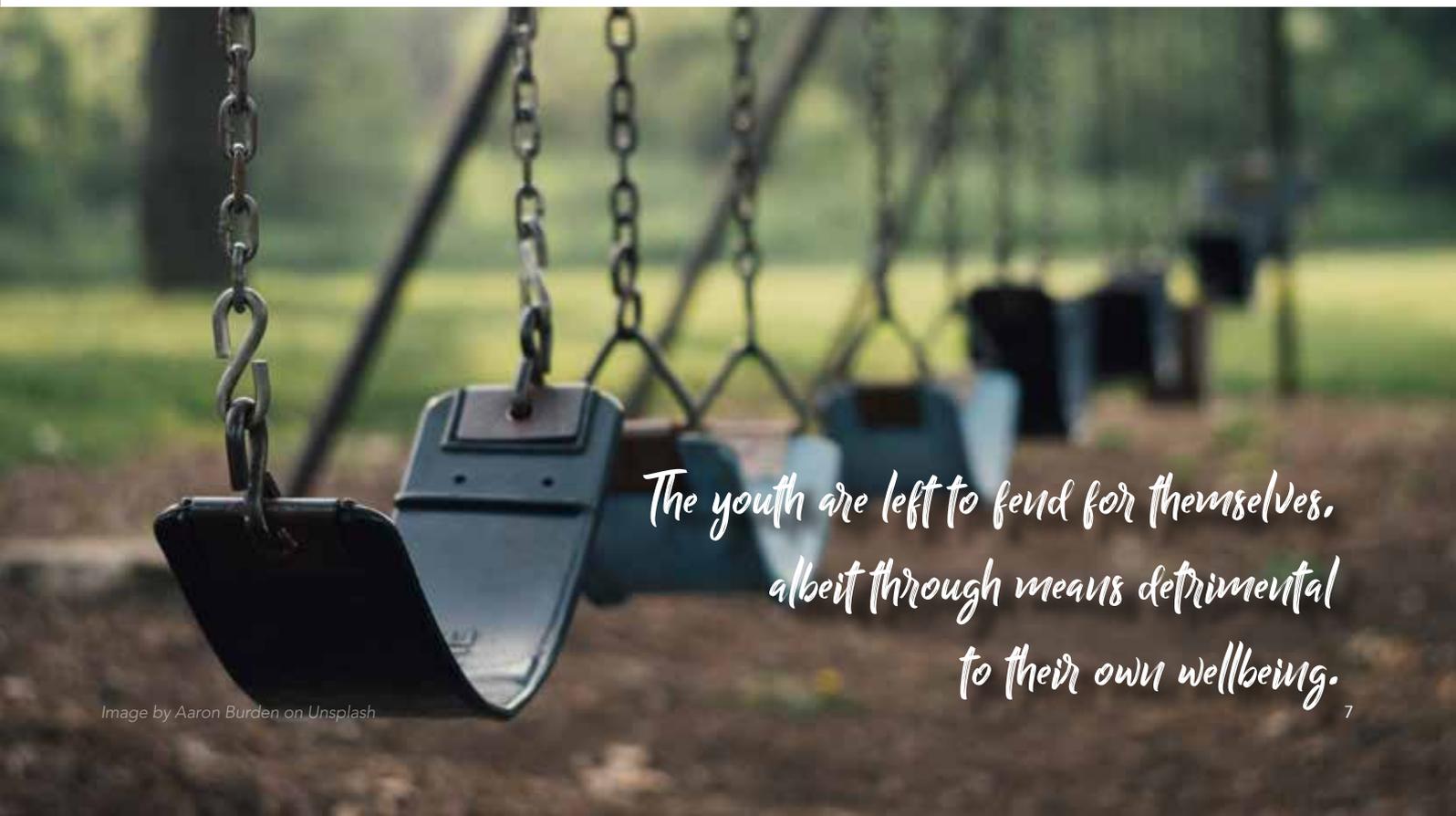
Often, they justify such actions with distorted perceptions saying that it doesn't cause harm to the child since there is no physical contact between the child and the "client". Additionally, the child is made to believe that what they do helps the family survive. According to The Asean Post, clients usually pay 19 USD to 190 USD for each act on livestream, depending on the bodily exposure or difficulty of sexual acts involved.

Some cases involving teenagers need not have traffickers or pimps. There were reports from local authorities of some teens selling their own lewd photos and videos or other sensual content through social networking sites, allegedly to raise funds to pay for their internet bills and gadgets for online classes.

This pandemic has taken its toll on the country's health. But more importantly, and alarmingly, the economic struggle brought by the pandemic has caused a ripple effect - exacerbating the already prevalent issues of human trafficking and online sexual exploitation, tearing families apart, and leaving the youth to fend for themselves albeit through means detrimental to their own wellbeing.

As horrific as this news sounds, it only reiterates the importance of our work in the Philippines, especially in areas considered to be at high-risk for exploitation and human trafficking.

Sources: *The Philippine Star* and *The Asean Post*



*The youth are left to fend for themselves,
albeit through means detrimental
to their own wellbeing.*

Stop Cybersex and Trafficking

through Education

We strongly believe that education is the key to systemic and sustainable change. We will reduce the future incidence of trafficking and cybersex crime through the implementation of targeted advocacy and community/school education strategies to “high-risk” locations.

During this time of pandemic where schools are still closed and students are more exposed online, more than ever, our work to raise awareness against Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) is very important. That’s why we and our partners continue to look for ways we can grow our advocacy work despite restrictions on gatherings.

During the past six months, our partner Honor 1000 reached out to local groups for possible partnerships, with the goal of reaching high risk communities and preventing OSAEC.





MILESTONES AND HIGHLIGHTS

- **2,042 children and parents** reached through home visits and infographic distribution
- **18 communities** reached through the Human Trafficking Awareness Campaign
- **74 microfinance women** attended Human Trafficking Awareness Campaign trainings
- **2 Human Trafficking Awareness Campaign events** held in communities with **87 attendees**





The Fight against Trafficking Continues

With schools closed and gatherings limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the high-risk provinces of Bataan and Siquijor have received house-to-house visits from our partner, Honor 1000. They distributed infographic materials and communicated with parents and children the dangers of human trafficking and online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC).

They were also able to successfully conduct a Human Trafficking Awareness Campaign (HTAC) session in a selected barangay* in Siquijor, where 87 people took part.

**smaller administrative unit within a municipality/city*

Health and safety precautions were followed and the teachers of the local public school, the police, and the local officials helped with the program. The head of the local police even served as a resource speaker, and imparted some information and knowledge they have on the issue of OSAEC.

The head of the local community was grateful that their area was chosen to hold the event. She said that this advocacy is very helpful in raising the residents' awareness about the danger of human trafficking and OSAEC. We hope that with this knowledge, the parents will now be more vigilant and protective of their children.

PHOTOS: (left) Parent attendees of HTAC and (right) Honor 1000 staff speaking during HTAC session

Children's Month

In line with the celebration of Children's Month in November, the Honor 1000 team partnered with local communities and schools to distribute information and activity packs on Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC). The materials were aimed at increasing communities' awareness on the issue of human trafficking and OSAEC especially during this time of pandemic.

In Siquijor, a rural province in the southern part of the Philippines, the team with the help of the local police has reached a total of 26 villages, 316 children, and 390 parents. Distribution is expected to be completed by the end of January.

In Manila, the team has partnered with a public elementary school whose students mostly come from the slum area and are at high-risk of being exploited.

Since schools are still closed and are using a modular learning approach, the teachers from the said school eagerly helped out in repacking the modules to be distributed to parents, to include the OSAEC materials. In total, they were able to distribute 693 activity materials.

The team also conducted random visits to the communities where the students live. During these visits, they were able to discuss and train parents on how they can keep their children safe online.



Teachers including the OSAEC information and activity packs in the students' module kits



Distribution of OSAEC information and activity materials in Siquijor

A woman from Blessed Project opening her gift during their Christmas celebration at the Blessed House



Survivors of Human Trafficking and Cybersex Abuse find Refuge at

The Blessed Project

Young women who have been rescued from trafficking are referred to the Blessed Project where they are provided with safe living conditions, counselling and support, life skills training and education, and assistance for eventual employment.

Blessed House has also expanded its services to support young children who have been rescued by authorities from cybersex abuse. Their rehabilitation from the trauma experienced, is managed professionally by trained social workers who patiently work with each child while foster care arrangements are found and their offenders await trial and prosecution.



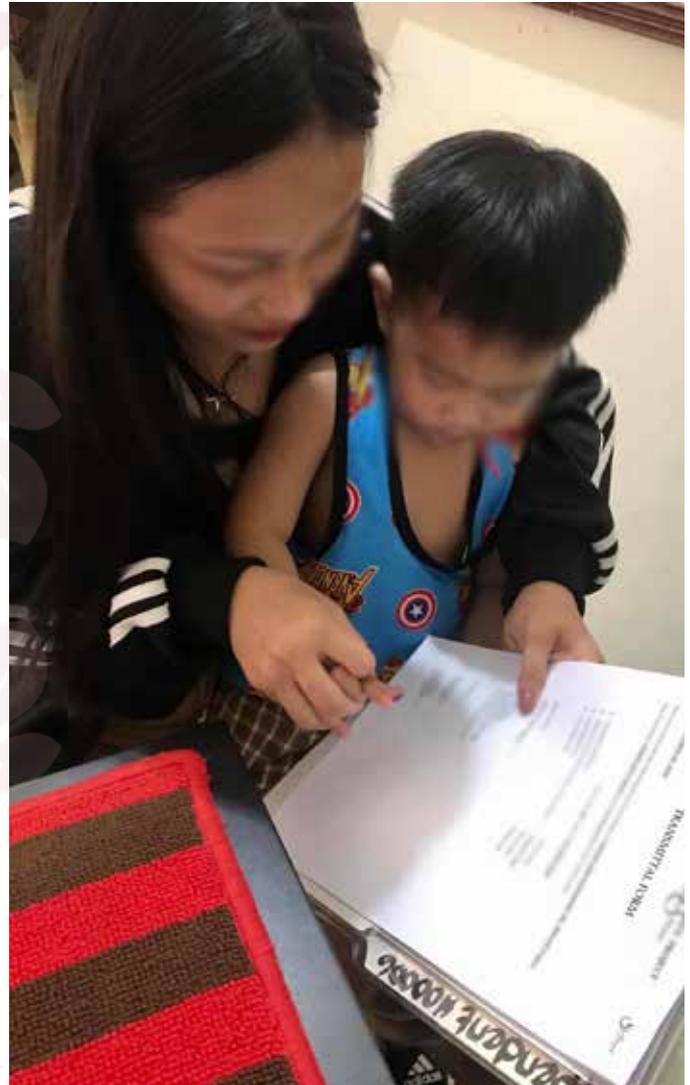
The road to recovery for the women and children at the Blessed House is rocky and challenging at times, but the commitment of the staff makes it possible for them to again live a life with confidence and dignity.

Many people have lost their jobs and they are desperate for income to survive. Schools have been closed and so now, children are in highly vulnerable situations. Philippine authorities are expecting a spike in arrests and rescues of victims of trafficking and cybersex crime due to the lockdown because of COVID-19. But the Blessed House is equipped and ready to receive these women and children who need a place of safety.

For the past two quarters, one of the key challenges is the delay in processing cases and transferring rescued victims to the shelter due to the lockdown. Each year, 30 children are expected to be referred for emergency care and support (usually around 3 months) until a new and safe home can be found for them to live.

MILESTONES AND HIGHLIGHTS

- **11 women and children** currently supported at the Blessed House
- **6 rescued** from online sexual exploitation
- **1 young woman** with **4 children** are now living independently with support
- **9 women** employed (part-time / full time) during the past six months
- **6 women** and **6 children** were reintegrated with their families



A woman from Blessed Project with her child preparing documents for their reintegration back into the community

Exceptional Sewing Skills

In June 2020, International Justice Mission (IJM) and the Philippine National Police rescued a deaf and mute 27-year-old online sexual exploitation victim and her two children. They were admitted to the Blessed House for immediate care.

The rescued victim also attended Blessed Project's Sewing Livelihood Program as part of her restoration. Through working on sewing orders from local clients, the sewing staff observed great potential in her.

She worked diligently and could easily pick up what the staff members were teaching and demonstrating to her. She is very particular with the quality of her output, and calls out and helps the other women as well as the staff if they overlooked some sewing techniques which will compromise the quality of the garments.

Her disability and her past did not hinder her from having a positive outlook in life. On the contrary, she works hard towards rebuilding a life of dignity for her and her children.





Honor 1000 staff coordinating with local officials and social workers for reintegration of women from Blessed



New Homes and Reintegration

Though we continue to feel the effects of the pandemic and prolonged lockdown in the Philippines, the Blessed Project has recently made progress in reintegrating 6 women and 6 children.

In 2019, we featured the story of two sisters who were rescued with the help of IJM. Their mother worked as a prostitute at night, leaving her two children with a male friend to watch over them. However, the man started abusing both of the girls repeatedly. Because of this, they would sneak out of the house at night and wander in the streets. They would often get called by foreigners into their hotel rooms and take videos of them naked.

Both sisters are now in a registered group home where they can go to school and be surrounded with the love and care they need to grow into amazing young women with bright futures.

Aside from these two sisters, four other women were reunited with their own families.

All these transfers and reintegrations were done with proper assessment from Blessed Project's social worker and the social workers from the referring agencies / NGOs. The Blessed Project will continue to closely monitor the women in their families and new homes to finalize and ensure their smooth transfer / reintegration.

Three Sisters are Now Safe

In October, three sisters [all minors] were rescued from online exploitation perpetrated by their own parents.

According to the local authorities' findings, the exploitation started in 2012 when the girls' mother would initiate "naked shows" in front of the camera and would ask the girls to join her. The abuse stopped for some time when their mother opened a small business selling pre-loved clothes.

However, when the pandemic hit, their mother reverted to exploiting them online.

There is an ongoing case against their mother while the police continues to search for their father who is said to be the one collecting their clients' payments.



One of the rescued girls now learning basic sewing skills at the Blessed Sewing Enterprise

At a Time of Pandemic

The prolonged pandemic in the Philippines has pushed our partner to make the necessary adjustments, especially for the women and children inside the Blessed House who are still in school and/or have ongoing cases.

Thanks to the staff and house parents, the Blessed House remains operational and ready to attend to the beneficiaries' needs.

Here are some stories of adjustments and progress at the Blessed Project even at a time of pandemic.

Background photo: House parent distributing modules to the girls at Blessed

Modular Learning

Since most schools in the Philippines remain closed, modular learning is being implemented. Many parents are struggling with having to juggle work, household chores and assisting their children in studying.

The house parents in Blessed are working hard to assist all the children and women in this new experience. Education is an integral part of our program in Blessed. This is what will help them live a life of dignity.



Kara during the online court hearing

Online Hearing

Kara* was featured in our last edition of More Precious than Diamonds. She was rescued during an entrapment operation in a spa which offers "extra service" to its clients. She was then transferred to the Blessed House where she continued to heal and rebuild her life, while also awaiting progress on her ongoing case against her perpetrator.

**name changed for privacy and protection*

Our referring partner, IJM, usually help in assisting the women in their court hearings. However, due to the pandemic and the implemented lockdown, Kara's court hearing had to be conducted online via video conference.

Blessed's social worker, Jhemma, assisted Kara in this new experience. They reviewed important details that might be brought up before the hearing. Jhemma also stayed with her throughout the hearing to assist with technical needs and provide emotional support. After the session, Jhemma helped Kara process her emotions as she was asked difficult questions. Despite the many adjustments needed with this new experience, Kara was able to effectively identify and testify against her perpetrator.



Work of the Heart

I am the Area Project Coordinator for the island of Siquijor. As a coordinator, my main job is to serve as an overseer of the various projects we have in this province and ensure that these projects create impact to the lives of the people involved.

Our projects include helping women to empower themselves through microfinance, raising awareness about human trafficking in schools and communities as well as in nearby islands, training volunteer advocates who would help us fulfill our goals, and connecting and establishing partnerships with the local government authorities such as the Department of Social Welfare and Development and the Philippine National Police to support us on our mission.

Photo: Maricar (lower right) with the Microfinance women in Siquijor



I am a licensed secondary school teacher but decided to pursue this career instead when I saw how being in this organization, I can contribute freely and bring great impact to people and help them raise themselves up to be better.

I am passionate about reaching out to people in communities, knowing and meeting other people, and being with children and mothers. I love to see lives changed. Because of the strength and courage people in this organization have to guide and support others, we are able to help people reach their goals too.

For me this is the noblest job - to see people change their lives, children are loved and valued, the youth are protected from possible danger of human trafficking, women are empowered to become strong foundations for their families.



Maricar Usaraga
AREA PROJECT COORDINATOR | Siquijor
HONOR 1000 MOVEMENT, INC.

Maricar conducting Human Trafficking Awareness Campaign sessions among parents and advocates



Eradicating Poverty through

Microfinance

Honor 1000's Microfinance Program operates in the provinces of Bataan and Pampanga. Both provinces were identified to be high-risk communities as these are located near port areas and "red light district" zones.

The Microfinance Program helps families from these communities take out small loans to either start or grow their business. This strategy aims to increase their stability, and permanently remove them from the risk of trafficking.

Microfinance clients also become part of women's groups where they are able to acquire support from each other, exchange ideas, and discuss plans for their businesses as well as for their families.

Due to the pandemic, the regular microfinance meetings came to a halt to comply with health protocols and community lockdown implemented by authorities. Nonetheless, we continued to provide support whatever way we could.

As some areas gradually lifted lockdown restrictions, some of the microfinance women were able to start their businesses again. However, collection rates still haven't returned to normal since businesses were only in partial operation.

Photo below: One of the Microfinance women's groups





MILESTONES AND HIGHLIGHTS

- **103** repaid their loans and are now considered **poverty-free**
- **11** new women added during the past six months
- **2,365** women with loans
- **109** loan groups



Mary in her mini grocery store

Back to Basics

As a mother of 5, Noemi and her husband have been working hard to keep all their kids in school and well provided for.

Noemi joined the program in 2015 and has been gradually growing her business. From direct selling of personal care products, she has now started selling household items and frozen products as well. This decision helped her a lot since most households reduced their purchases to basic necessities, including frozen goods.

Though times have been difficult, Noemi continues to persevere - reaching out to her loyal customers and paying her weekly commitments, while also saving for hard times and her family's future.

Mary's Story

Mary has been part of the Microfinance Program since 2014. She and her husband are blessed with two children. Their mini grocery store in front of their house has been their main source of income, and has been in operation for 6 years now. It is already the go-to store in their barangay.

With their long history, Mary shares how this pandemic has affected not just their business but the overall capacity of their neighbors to buy. As the secretary in her microfinance group, she has also been in touch with her fellow clients. They have been giving each other advice and strength on how they would be able to overcome this difficulty. Being able to save money before the pandemic hit has helped her pay her commitments without missing when collections resumed.



Noemi and some household items she sells



Inspiring Other Microfinance Moms

Maribel is one of our first clients in Floridablanca, being with us since 2017. With 5 children and her husband unable to work due to his eye condition, she has been supporting her family with her small businesses. They have a small grocery store in front of their house, and she also accepts plastic bottles, aluminum and iron in her junk shop.

This recent pandemic has been hard especially for small business earners like Maribel. She is grateful that her older children were able to keep their jobs and even give small amounts for daily needs of their family.

PHOTOS: Maribel in her junkshop (left) and her mini convenience store (right)

With her younger children still in school, she needed to buy a smartphone to help with the mixed learning set-up. And with hard work, focusing on her grocery store, and budgeting, she was able to buy the needed phone for her children's education.

Maribel has also been an encouragement to her fellow mothers, as she has been able to pay her weekly obligations with no miss even during the lockdowns.

Saving for Her Children's Future

With the first loan Florian got, she transformed her small grocery store from being made of sheets of bamboo strips to sturdier cement blocks. This will ensure that her store will withstand storms that frequently visit the country. Florian has four children, giving birth to her youngest just over a month ago. It is important for her to secure their family's means of income.

Florian joined the Microfinance Program in February 2020 - a month before the pandemic hit and lockdowns were placed all over the country. When collections resumed in June, she was able to pay for her weekly commitments. She even adds more than what is required to her savings each week. She knows how important it is to save up for her children's future while they are still young that's why she saves part of her income whenever possible. She is also grateful to have a business that allows her to sell within the security of their home.

PHOTO: Florian inside her small grocery store

Earning while Being of Help to Her Community

Amy joined the Microfinance Program in 2019. She is a proud mother of two and owner of a small grocery store in front of their house. She's grateful to have a business that allows her to stay at home to take care of her two children.

The pandemic has impacted not just her own family but also her community. She experienced neighbors asking to take some goods from her grocery store on loan, and pay at a later date. She was faced with the challenge of having to balance her own income while also understanding the needs of those around her.

She is thankful that despite this challenge, she's been able to consistently pay her weekly commitment and even steadily increase her savings.

Her consistent payments granted her to avail of the next loan cycle in September 2020. Although the country is still facing economic crisis, surviving businesses with diligent owners like Amy, are granted the chance to receive these small business capital.



Amy inside her small grocery store

Self-Sustainability for Honor 1000 Movement



Women at the Blessed Project's Sewing Social Enterprise

Honor 1000 Movement aims to generate their own income to decrease ongoing reliance on donors. This will be achieved through two commercial vehicles: (1) Microfinance profits, and (2) Sewing Social Enterprise, as well as through in-country fundraising.

The lockdowns since March 2020 have affected both revenue streams significantly. Some additional measures were implemented to prevent payment delays. The team shifted collections from the microfinance clients to online bank transfers as some group meetings couldn't occur. They also increased the frequency of updates on cash collections.

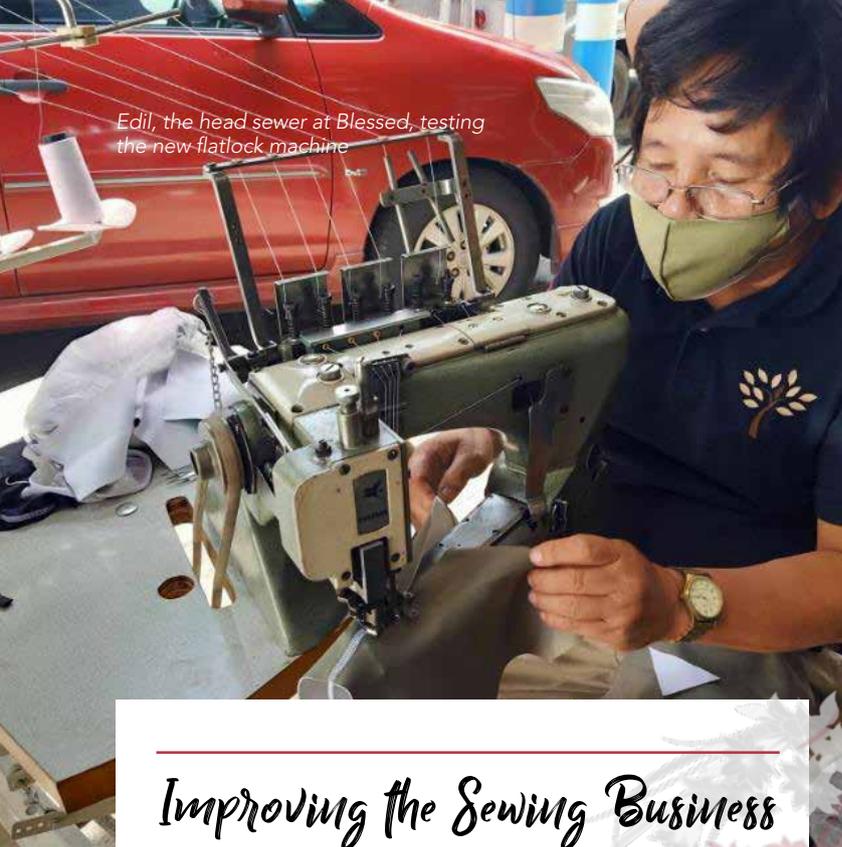
As a move towards sustainability, Honor 1000 also updated their pricing for the sewing products handcrafted by the women at the Blessed Project, ensuring that production costs are covered plus enough margin for profits.

KEY GOALS

The goal is to raise the following percentages of operating budget in the financial years:

- 26% by 2018/19 - **Achieved**
- 34% by 2019/20 - **24%** (due to COVID)
- 46% by 2020/21 - **35%** (estimated due to COVID)

We are hopeful to get our sustainability program back on track once everything fully opens up and confidence returns.



Improving the Sewing Business

There is a shift in certain sewing techniques to ensure quality of products can be achieved by using a particular machine.

Through perseverance and with the help of generous people who donated, the team was able to purchase one flatlock machine.

The senior sewers at Blessed immediately trained the women on how to use the new machine and adapt new techniques. The team has been working on samples with new brands of thread as well. Once the samples are approved, the team will proceed with the bulk production of clothing.



Also, Blessed Sewing Enterprise has continued building their network of local partners.

Recently, they received a new job order from a company that produces blouses for a local clothing brand.

This, along with other sewing projects (tote bags, pouches, uniforms), has helped the sewers and the women regain their momentum despite several months of lockdown. This also provided an opportunity for the women to enhance and master sewing techniques, that will eventually help in increasing the whole team's work capacity.

You can be Involved Today

Contact info@captivating.org

Donate to this project through our website www.captivating.org and receive tax deductible receipts for Australia, US, NZ, or Hong Kong donations.

Speak up and spread the word about these projects to your family, friends, and business networks.

If you have any query regarding this report, please contact daniella@captivating.org



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