**A human trafficking survivor shares a story.**

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In a harrowing case of human trafficking, a 25-year-old lady from Mekaling, Mohale’s Hoek was rescued by local authorities in Port Elizabeth last week. After being deceived into travelling to the city under the pretense of legitimate job offer, this woman was subjected to exploitation and abuse.

Ntieleng Mahlomola, was lured into a nightmare of human trafficking by her own cousin, who promised her a job opportunity in Port Elizabeth. Believing her cousin’s assurances of a better future, Mahlomola travelled to the city, only to find herself trapped in a situation far from the promised employment. Joalane Mapane (27), her cousin, who was allegedly part of the larger trafficking ring, exploited her trust and let her into abuse.

Human trafficking is harrowing experience that devastates lives in unimaginable ways. Survivor often recount the profound psychological and physical trauma they endured. For instance, our survivor, Mahlomola described her ordeal of being trafficked under false pretense, only to be subjected to relentless abuse and exploitation. “I was promised a good job, but instead I was trapped in a cycle of physical violence and sexual exploitation,” Mahlomola said.

The emotional scars left by such experiences are deep and enduring, with many victims facing severe mental health issues such as, PTSD, depression, and anxiety long after their rescue. The isolation and the manipulation used by traffickers exacerbate these effects, making recovery a challenging and prolonged process. Reintegration into society poses additional difficulties for survivors. Many faces stigma, legal challenges, difficulties in assessing necessary services, including mental health care and vocational training.

Support systems are crucial, yet often inadequate. Organizations that provide aid, such as counseling, legal assistance, job placement services, play a vital role in helping survivors rebuild their lives. However, the gap between the support needed and what is available highlight a significant area for improvement. Addressing these needs requires a comprehensive approach that includes better funding for support services and more robust policies to protect and empower survivors, ensuring that they receive the help they need to reclaim their lives in dignity.

In an interview with Mahlomola, she said, “From the moment I arrived in Port Elizabeth, it was a nightmare. I was beaten regularly for the smallest mistakes like coughing or asking for water and the violence only escalated. The beatings and physical abuse were to maintain dominance and control over me. They claimed to be disciplining me by regular slaps and whipping if I failed to follow one of their orders.

The sexual abuse was constant, I was forced into acts against my will and threatened if I disobeyed. I was often reminded to follow their orders because it was their money used to buy me from my cousin. They manipulated me psychologically, isolating me from anyone who could help, and constantly using fear and intimidation to control me. They used tactics such as, constant threats, emotional blackmail, and gas lighting to instill fear and confusion, making me powerless and trapped in my situation. I was made to work long hours without pay, and they stole any money I earned, saying I was in debt to them. I was also neglected, given barely enough food and no medical care. It felt like there was no escape, until I finally reached out to local organization and was rescued.”

Moving on, Mahlomola’s ordeal ended where South African authorities, working in conjunction with a local organization dedicated to combating human trafficking, intervened in her desperate situation. The South African Policy Service (SAPS), human trafficking unit which focus on investigation and rescuing victims of human trafficking within South Africa and The International Organization for Migration (IOM), which works internationally to combat human trafficking, providing support and repatriation services for survivor, acted on a tip-off from Mahlomola who managed to reach out through a covert communication

The rescue operation was swift and executed with sensitivity, ensuring Mahlomola’s immediate safety. Following her rescue, she received comprehensive support from the organization, which provide emergency medical care, psychological counselling, and temporary housing. The organization also facilitated, her access to legal assistance, helping her navigate the complex process of reporting her traffickers and seeking justice.

With her immediate needs addressed, Mahlomola was placed in a rehabilitation program designed to assist survivors in their transition to a stable life. The program included vocational training and job placement services to help her regain independence. Eventually, with the organizations’ support, Mahlomola was able to return to her home country of Lesotho. The journey back was carefully coordinated to ensure her continued safety and well-being. Upon her arrival, Mahlomola was connected with local networks in Lesotho, that provided ongoing care and integration services. Her recovery journey, while still ongoing, was significantly supported by the dedicated efforts of those who rescued and aided her, highlighting the critical role of such organizations in the fight against human trafficking and rehabilitation of its survivors.

Upon her return to Lesotho, Mahlomola received vital support from several key organizations dedicated to aiding trafficking survivors. The Lesotho Red Cross Society, known for its extensive humanitarian work, provided immediate assistance by offering safe housing and emergency medical care. The organization also connected her with psychological support services to help her cope with trauma she endured. In addition, The Lesotho Anti-Trafficking Coalition (LATC) played a crucial role in Mahlomola’s reintegration. LATC, which works to combat human trafficking and support survivors, facilitate her access to legal assistance to ensure that she could navigate any legal challenges related to her trafficking experience.

They also provided vocational training and job placement services, helping her rebuild her independence and secure stable employment. The Lesotho Social Welfare Department worked closely with LATC to offer ongoing support, including counselling and rehabilitation services. They also helped her to connect with community resources and support networks to aid her transition back to society. Through these comprehensive efforts, she received the necessary support to begin her recovery and reintegration highlighting the importance of collaborative efforts between organizations in addressing the complex needs of trafficking survivors.

As Mahlomola’s case gained attention, LATC coordinated with the Lesotho Mounted Police Service (LMPS) and the Interpol Trafficking Unit to investigate and apprehend those responsible for her trafficking. LATC’s advocacy and support efforts included gathering evidence and the facilitating interviews to strengthen the case against the traffickers. The collaboration efforts of these organizations led to a significant breakthrough when Mahlomola’s cousin and several other traffickers were arrested. The arrests were result of a coordinated investigations involving local law enforcement and international partners, facilitated by the evidence and testimonies provided by her and supported by LATC.

With her traffickers apprehend, she found a sense of justice and relieve and the collaborative support from Lesotho’s organizations played a crucial role in her journey from victim to survivor, ensuring that she could begin to heal and rebuild her life with the assurance of greater safety and justice.

The impact of human trafficking on survivors like Mahlomola extends far beyond immediate trauma. Victims often face long term psychological effects including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. Her experiences left her grappling with these challenges, affecting her ability to trust, form relationships, and lead a normal life. Additionally, the physical abuse and exploitation she endured resulted in lasting health issues that required ongoing medical attention.

Addressing the complex issue of human trafficking requires a multifaceted approach. One potential solution involves strengthening law enforcement and judicial systems to ensure traffickers are prostituted and held accountable. Enhanced training for law enforcement officers and judicial personal can improve the ability to handle trafficking classes effectively and sensitively. Additionally, increasing public awareness through education campaigns can help communities recognize and report suspicious activities, potential preventing trafficking before it occurs.

Support for survival must be robust and comprehensive. Victim assistance programs should be expanded to include not only emergency relieve but also long tern support services such as counselling, job training, and legal aid. International cooperation is also crucial, as trafficking often involves cross-border networks. Collaborative efforts between countries and organizations can strengthen their global response to trafficking and enhance resource sharing and best practices.

Addressing the route courses of trafficking, such as poverty, lack of education, and inequality is essential for prevention. Investing in education, economic development and social services can reduce the vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit. By implementing these solutions, societies can work towards eradicating human trafficking and supporting survivors like Mahlomola in their path to recovery and justice.

In conclusion, Mahlomola’s journey from victim to survivor underscores the devastating impact of human trafficking and the critical importance of coordinated, multi-faceted response. The collaborative efforts of organizations such as, the Lesotho Red Cross Society, The Lesotho Anti-Trafficking Coalition, and the Lesotho Social Welfare Development, alongside local and international law enforcement, exemplify the essential support structures needed to address these grave issue.

To effectively combat human trafficking, it is imperative that communities, governments and organizations continue to strengthen their efforts. By enhancing public awareness, improving victim support services, and addressing the root causes of trafficking, we can work towards a future where such exploitation is eradicated, and every survivor receives the justice and healing they deserves.