

CHANGE AGENTS OF THE COMMON GOOD

Leading preventative action against human trafficking and slave labor

“Aquele que antes havia sido explorado, e perdeu a memória de ter sido, explorará. Aquele que foi desprezado e finge tê-lo esquecido, refinará o seu próprio desprezar. Aquele a quem ontem rebaixaram, rebaixará hoje com mais rancor” (José Saramago).

Modern day slavery, perpetuated by prejudice and discrimination, affects thousands of people hidden in slums working under constant physical and psychological threats. Immigrants are the most vulnerable targets for this degrading work, subject to conditions that put their health and life at risk. Often in makeshift workshops, workers are at sewing stations for up to fifteen hours a day, living in cramped shared quarters. In the over 20,000 workshops scattered throughout the metropolitan area of São Paulo, conditions are often compared to private prisons where the dream of a better life morphs into a nightmare come true.

In order to combat slave labor and human trafficking in the current reality, we collaborate directly with immigrant leaders in their communities in the outskirts of São Paulo, striving to expose the needs of immigrant workers and their families. This entails conveying rights of citizenship, organizing advocacy groups *in loco*, and compiling and sharing information regarding news and reports on rights' violations.

Three years' of investigating almost 3,000 sewing workshops reveals startling numbers: each workshop houses at least four workers, more than half of them under thirty years of age, many without completing basic education. Women are increasingly becoming head of the household while working without pay or benefits, usually out of an alleged debt to the employer.

Transformation Agents

CAMI is a bridge between the immigrant community, civil society and the state, constantly promoting transformation and advocacy. CAMI commits itself to defending the rights, the citizenship and the common good through diverse leadership, emerging from immigrant communities through the theory, practice and basic training, that operate in key immigrant neighborhoods.

Information about foreign national registration requirements, workers rights in Brazil, healthcare access, and resources available through other advocacy organizations (that also provide social and legal support) is distributed to both owners and employees during workshop visits. Information about CAMI's Portuguese, modeling, information technology, and entrepreneurship courses is also shared.

Regulations and Citizenship

Due to lack of enforcement of migratory regulations, most problems discovered in the sewing workshops are due to labor exploitation and poor working conditions. Many workers are unaware of their right to be documented and thus protected. Of those that do try to obtain documentation, many do not finish due to the confusing requirements or high cost of federal fees. Large families further complicate payment rates, which leads to further exploitation.

CAMI distributes information to register with the National Registry of Foreigners (RNE) to workshop owners and employees. If, after an initial visit, a large number of requests are made

for further information, temporary mobile centers providing additional information are set up in strategic places in partnership with schools , churches and other public places in immigrant communities.

Additionally, information sessions are regularly conducted on the rights to healthy working conditions, community leadership, and health issues such as preventative, prenatal and hygienic care; the latter presented by healthcare professionals.

Many immigrants, especially new arrivals, are unaware of the universal right to free healthcare access through the National Health System (SUS), which is available even without a residence permit. Tuberculosis is specifically discussed due to its prevalence in sewing workshop living conditions. Research indicates an increase in the number of cases among the immigrant population, which is only second to the most vulnerable social group, the homeless.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of immigrants is unaware of the risks of Tuberculosis due to the lack of materials available in Spanish.

Discrimination and Gender Violence

A visit to a workshop is about more than simply talking to the immigrant employees. Its primary goal is collecting evidence through interviews with the employees that can then be reported. Examples of problems reported by CAMI agents are: extremely high production targets that require inhumane work hours (which leads to degraded physical and mental health due to little rest or time for recreation), withholding of wages and prejudice experienced in schools and social settings.

No official data exists yet regarding the number of women working in the sewing workshops, but the situations we have encountered thus far are troubling. We can infer that the number is quite significant out of the 20,000 workshops evaluated, where two out of the four workers are women. In recent years, both the Department of Labor of São Paulo and CAMI observed an increase in domestic violence cases involving Latin immigrant women, specifically Bolivian women. Some of these victims escape to Brazil, fleeing domestic violence situations in their home country. In Brazil they hope to rebuild their lives and find a place in the sun, but commonly encounter a similar, if not worse, violent situation through labor exploitation and a language barrier that many times leads to their supervisors withholding legal documentation. These cases are normally reported to organizations that provide support to immigrant victims of violence, as public services, such as the police or health facilities, tend to lack empathy toward the victims.

Work Safety

Our outreach work with local community change agents is improving the sewing workshop environment, as well as in churches, schools, soccer field, and other public spaces. Thus a visit from a technician trained in safe work environment practices greatly improves a workshop's overall safety and prevents avoidable health risks to employees' lives.

Cultural Link

Our change agents become technical and cultural links in the daily lives of immigrants and their communities. They conduct cross-cultural interaction activities that encourage social interaction with others and promote self-esteem.

Social and Political Engagement

Another important aspect of CAMI outreach is building a strong sense of community among immigrants. In Brazil social movements are crucial to social change, so encouraging

mobilization of immigrants alongside honoring their contributions to Brazilian society is important in obtaining equal rights and political recognition.

“Slave Labor and Human Trafficking Prevention Practices” project summarizes CAMI’s change agent progress and received the Simone Borges Award in 2014, granted by the Ministry of Justice, during the National Conference on Migration and Refugees (COMIGRAR).

Mission Immigrant Support Center (CAMI)
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