

# Empowering women to be catalysts for change

Interview with Marissa Kokkoros of Aura Freedom International  
by Elisa Graf

**A**ura Freedom International is a Canadian charity working to end violence against women and human trafficking in Canada and around the world. Elisa Graf interviewed Executive Director, Marissa Kokkoros in Toronto, in November 2018 for *Share International*.

*Share International: Tell us about Aura Freedom. How were you inspired to create it?*

Marissa Kokkoros: I always had this burning sense of justice – [an awareness of] people who had been wronged or oppressed or marginalized in some way, somehow being able to come back and lead a life of dignity and see justice. I was living in Italy, and I was using it as a home base and I did a lot of traveling. I went to different countries and studied the social position of women around the world, and saw that we're the same in so

many countries; we carry the village's responsibilities on our back, and we carry the water, we carry the finance, in whatever country we're living in. I spent time in some African countries, in Nepal and India, in European countries, and I saw patterns and thought, "I have to do something."

I met a Nigerian woman, who used to beg outside of my house in Italy, and befriended her. I knew she spoke English because I heard her speak English on her cell phone once. So I asked her, "Do you want to go for a coffee?" We had breakfast and

she told me her story. She was trafficked from Nigeria to Milano by a Nigerian promising her work in a clothing store, and she came from a really poor village – the same story that I heard in countless countries, and right here in my own city of Toronto, in a different way.

*SI: Did you meet her while she was being trafficked or after she had escaped?*

MK: She was working as a prostitute in Torino and I met her when she had already exited that. She opened my eyes to human trafficking and then I started researching it around the world. I ended up in Nepal with one of my mentors – her name is Anuradha Koirala. (see interview in the July/August 2012 issue of *Share International*.) She's a Nepalese woman who's done the most amazing work. I just wanted to learn from her and I literally went to Nepal and knocked on her door and she let me in. And now she's been to Canada three times, and slept in my spare room, and taught me a lot of what I know. I had this international view of trafficking, but when I came back home to Toronto to start Aura Freedom, I realized that it was happening right here in Toronto.

*SI: So what was the most surprising thing for you to find out about what human trafficking looks like in Toronto – in your own backyard?*

MK: You know that it's different from what we see in films: a girl is drugged and driven across the border, or, you know, manipulated in some way and promised a job. Here, it's the "Romeo pimp"; it's the promise of love. And the common thing I see is that there's a vulnerability that's exploited, whether that vulnerability be poverty, whether that vulnerability be a girl's sense of self-worth; that it's just not enough that she thinks that she's okay to be on her own. She's going to believe everything that this man is telling her.

What I've noticed that is common throughout the world is that there's a lack of value placed on girls; and even more so if she is an indigenous girl or from another community of color. If there was enough value placed on women and girls, we would



Courtesy of Marissa Kokkoros

**"What I've noticed that is common throughout the world is that there's a lack of value placed on girls; and even more so if she is an indigenous girl or from another community of color. If there was enough value placed on women and girls, we would find it difficult to exploit them."**

find it difficult to exploit them. That to me is the root cause. And I've had arguments with people saying it's poverty, it's a lack of policing, etc. However, I believe that gender inequality, patriarchy, colonialism and systemic racism are what we really need to address. We need to empower marginalized communities of women and girls. After all, it is very difficult to exploit an empowered person.

So I did a lot of work here in the city with the Toronto Counter Human Trafficking Network, and now we're working with the City of Toronto, which has given us funding for just a year. I've recruited six young girls and many of them have lived experience with trafficking, and we are empowering them, through mentorship and training, to go and do outreach in their own communities, with their own peers.

*SI: Where did you meet people that you could help in Toronto?*

MK: They're in every community; it happens everywhere. There's not a country in the world that doesn't have human trafficking either as a source country or a country where the individuals are actually exploited, from the clothes that we wear to the coffee we drink to the sex trade – it's everywhere. I started attending community meetings in the city of Toronto. Like I said, the anti-trafficking network here really helped me get acquainted with who's doing what in the city, and then I realized that the problem was huge. So I started doing outreach in schools; we put together a presentation. We have an 83 per cent disclosure rate. So whenever we go out, 83 per cent of the time, after we speak, a youth will approach me, or one of my colleagues. We always travel with a trained trauma counselor, who knows sexual violence very well, and she's trained in trafficking to receive these disclosures.

Then we started partnering with organizations in the city that provide counseling, and provide healing for survivors, and they believe in our project because it's based on education and knowledge – just giving these kids information. We start with Grades 9 and 10, because that's the age of exploitation.

Aura Freedom is a very small grassroots organization even now, with city funding; I'm the only full-time employee. We have a board of directors, who help when they can, and now we have these six young people who are doing outreach, but I had to really harness the skills of the people I knew in

the city. Once I put the energy into it, it just happened: doors started opening, people started coming and saying, "Do you need help?" I really believe in this project – it's giving these girls training. It's paying for training and counseling and mentorship and just empowering them to change what they can in their own communities. I believe that the education that our six trainees are getting and receiving in the mentorship will create ripple effects, to make lasting differences not only in their own lives, but in their own communities. It is already; one of the young women who is working with us is actually one of the girls who came up to me in a school and said, "I need help." And so it's full circle. Now she's working with us to help others. I think the only way to do really good work when you're dealing with violence is to have survivors. I'm not a trafficking survivor – I've had my own experience with violence, but I was never trafficked, so I work with them. One of my colleagues is an indigenous survivor of trafficking – a Canadian – and I look to her for a lot of support. Her name is Bridget Perrier. She's one of the mentors for these girls.

*SI: And the aims of the project are that the girls go on a regular schedule to speak at schools?*

MK: Yes, to speak at schools, and shelters. We'd also go and speak at youth shelters because trafficking is prevalent with homeless youth. We realize that a lot of sex work is not always forced, but there's a lot of coercion involved and a lot of influence from life situations and things like that. I've seen young women who've fallen through the cracks of a weak social welfare system, who've had child sexual abuse in their life.

*SI: Tell us a little bit about the groups you partner with.*

MK: The Toronto Rape Crisis Center is a huge partner of ours. What that means is one of their counselors accompanies us to every single presentation that we host. And so when we do have disclosure, there's immediate on-site trauma counseling, and then there's ongoing case management, and through that partnership, we've had one of our new youth facilitators come into the program because she received counseling and case management for two years from the Toronto Rape Crisis Center.

There are organizations that have been doing anti-trafficking work way before Aura Freedom, because we're still a young org-

ganization. We've been a charity in Canada only since 2014, we've had our charitable status for four years, but we can't do it alone. We need organizations like the Covenant House which has beds for survivors. So we refer to our community partners as I believe in working together.

We've done a lot of policy work as well. The municipal government has asked for our input for new strategies surrounding human trafficking survivors – for them to access housing, and more services. There's a new federal anti-trafficking plan that's going to be released and we were asked to inform them on that.

*SI: And you also have a partnership with Maiti Nepal?*

MK: Yes, we did some fundraising and some work with Maiti Nepal, which is Anuradha Koirala's organization and through that partnership, we have supported the empowerment and healing of some survivors in Nepal. When the earthquake hit in 2015, we took a lot of the funding we received [raised by various groups in Canada], and with another organization called Apeiron – which is an Italian-Nepalese organization – created female-friendly spaces. They were traveling shelters that were put up in displacement camps. Thousands of Nepalese were homeless, and so displacement camps were popping up in all these places, and they're not safe places for women or girls. We were putting up these temporary shelters and we got Global Affairs Canada behind us. I wrote a proposal and they funded us for two years in a row, and we opened 10 shelters in camps in Nepal.

That was a beautiful project. [It] was all implemented by local women, speaking local dialect. We designed the project with the local women; we put it in place, we assisted where they needed our help – but essentially it has to come from the local community; it has to be culturally appropriate. We were giving education, we were informing these young girls and women on their rights. We had over 40 birth certificates registered, divorce certificates registered – things that people had never had before. Women at the age of 60 were learning the alphabet for the first time, in literacy classes.

After disasters, after war and displacement of communities, relief for girls and women now looks really different. It's empowerment. It's education. Yes, you need the blankets and the rice, but you also need

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## Empowering women

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to know that if you are raped, in a camp or if your husband or your father is abusing you, you have the right – there is help available to you. We were talking about safe migration and unsafe migration, because girls were being trafficked right out of the camps to orphanages, and they weren't even orphans; their parents were still alive. Their parents were being told that they were going to be taken, given some type of education, given food and that is the truth, but they were being put in orphanages – and this happens in Nepal a lot.

And then at the same time our partners at Maiti Nepal said, you know, there's the school that needs rebuilding, and I had some other funding come in specifically for earthquake relief. So we're rebuilding a school right now in Nepal in the Kavre district. It's a primary school and many of the buildings were unsafe, and some of them were just completely destroyed. I went to see the site

and there were 250 school children attending class in this kind of tin structure – they're called TLCs (temporary learning centers) – the government had put them up. But it was freezing. It was raining on the day that I went and it's not conducive to any type of learning. I met with the principal and the vice principal. It's the Tamang community, which is an ethnic group in Nepal, and child marriage is a reality for girls there; they're pulled out of school to get married. Alcoholism and gender-based violence is very prevalent. And so school education is really important, because the longer these young people stay in school, the better it is – not only to reduce child marriage, but violence, and to give them job opportunities. Trafficking is not an issue when you have an education.

A Canadian mining company, Hatch, donated Canadian \$60,000 and then we fundraised the rest. We needed over \$100,000 in the end to start the project and now we're starting! We broke ground in February.

*SI: So what is it that you would really like people to know, and how can they help?*

MK: Being aware is important. I think that people have to learn to cry again. In the circle of this human trafficking space that I work in now, it's easy to become hardened by the stories that we hear, and the pain that we see.

Donate to your local women's shelters or to funds that support women. And just know that feminism is only about equality and allowing girls and women to lead safe and dignified lives. That's all that means.

But what I can say that everyone can do is just recognize or rediscover the humanity that they have inside of themselves. Rediscover compassion and empathy; when you see someone on the street – what have they gone through? Why are they begging? Why are they panhandling? What has put them there – just to see, rather than judging.

For more information, please visit <http://aurafreedom.org>

## Point of view

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outrageous that US tax dollars in the form of military aid to Israel are permitted to sustain what is clearly a gross human rights violation against children."

Yousef Munayyer, executive director of the US Campaign for Palestinian Rights, welcomed the reintroduction: "Progressive values demand freedom, justice, and equality for all people and across all issues, and we commend Rep. McCollum for putting hers into practice. For too long, Congress has given Israel a blank check even as it has entrenched its brutal military occupation and escalated human rights abuses against the Palestinian people. H.R. 2407 is an important step toward demanding accountability and sending a stern message that the American people do not want their tax dollars being used to deprive Palestinian children of their rights and childhoods."

Rabbi Alissa Wise, Deputy Director, Jewish Voice for Peace said: "Palestinian children – like all children – should be protected and treasured. It is unconscionable that US military aid to Israel is enabling the Israeli military's systematic abuse of Palestinian children; beatings, solitary confinement, and arbitrary detention are no way to

treat a child. By prohibiting US aid from funding these human rights violations, Rep. McCollum's legislation recognizes that change will only happen when Congress demands real accountability."

Dr Osama Abuirshaid, executive director of American Muslims of Palestine, stated: "This legislation comes at a time when progressives are increasingly demanding a reckoning over the role US military aid to Israel plays in violations of Palestinian rights. The legislation specifically asserts that the more than \$3.8 billion in annual funds to Israel enable mistreatment of children, and it includes detailed accounts of Israel's systemic mistreatment of Palestinian children from a wide range of international organizations.

As national campaign partners with the No Way To Treat a Child Campaign, led by Defense of Children-International and American Friends Service Committee, the US Campaign for Palestinian Rights, American Muslims for Palestine, and Jewish Voice for Peace will mobilize their affiliate organizations and thousands of members across the country to urge members of Congress to co-sponsor this legislation and stand in support of Palestinian rights. (Source: Jewish Voice for Peace)

## Algeria

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eral Gaïd Salah sides with the people: "The army is committed to meeting all the demands of the people." He announces that "the army has given strict instructions for the protection of citizens, especially during demonstrations". In doing so, he tries to 'disable' the regime's diehards who want to stifle this movement by repression.

The judiciary launches a series of investigations into corruption, mainly targeting businessmen close to the government. The four billionaire Kouninef brothers close to Bouteflika are placed in custody.

### Protesters demand a real renewal

On Friday 26 April, for the 10th consecutive Friday, millions of Algerians continue to demonstrate peacefully in the country, demanding the departure of the entire clique of Bouteflika, civil service and military, and demanding the establishment of a transitional government that includes none of the former leaders.

The next few months will show how this horizontal movement without leaders can bring about the realization of its hopes. (Source France culture; BFMTV; Mediapart; TV5 monde; YouTube)