



By Verne Marce

The late August day I meet up with Pia and Katrina is a busy one: tomorrow, they're involved in an event at the Arts House, the two-year celebration of the STOP campaign against sex trafficking. As we speak, finalists are flying into Singapore for the finals of their Project Inspire. A documentary film festival is lined up for the first week of September. And simmering in the background are plans for SNOW, the annual gala dinner that is UN Women Singapore's main fundraiser.

UN Women is the United Nations' Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, active in most countries of the world. In Singapore, it operates from a crowded little office in one of those three lovely black-and-white colonial houses in Nassim Road, provided at a suitably low rental by the SIIA (Singapore Institute of International Affairs). It may be a small office, but the energetic people in it generate a huge amount of activity.

Pia Bruce, Sweden

Executive Director

How did you get into this line of work?

I was always interested in international affairs, even as a child. My first exposure to the UN was an internship at the UN Non-Government Liaison Service in New York as part of my undergraduate degree at a Midwestern college in the US – that's when I decided I would love to work for the UN one day.

Doing my Masters in Public Policy at the Harvard JFK School of Government in Boston was an amazing opportunity to hear the ideas of interesting speakers, especially on international affairs and organisations. But I was among the youngest in my class, with no work experience, and I realised I needed some; so I worked in management consulting for the next five years – in Western Europe, Eastern Europe and the US.

What brought you to Singapore?

It was actually my husband, Jasjit Singh, who chose Singapore. This was his turn: I'd chosen our last home, Boston, and he had had enough of cold winters. After interviewing with a number of business schools here, he joined INSEAD, where he teaches Strategy. Our two boys, Pawan Eric (9) and Basant Leo (7), are both at UWC, where they're already getting involved in community service.



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At the start I worked at INSEAD, too, project-managing a financial education programme run jointly with Citibank, and was part of the founding team of the domestic workers' micro business school Aidha. Aidha was the baby of UNIFEM.

How does your background suit you for your current role?

My experience in strategy and change management helps me change direction quickly when necessary, come up with fresh approaches for evolving circumstances and run with new opportunities as they arise.

There's only so much that the five of us here can do, so we need to work effectively with NGOs, schools and the media. Rather than saying no to a new project idea, I look for a way to say yes: as long it is within our scope and mandate, and as long as there is someone who wants to do it. There usually is, though, as many of our projects and ideas originate from within the team.

Who are the women of UN Women in Singapore?

We're a mixed bunch: something of a United Nations all on our own! We have a full-time operational manager; I'm the executive director – in theory part-time, but in practice full-time; three associates, a couple of interns, plus volunteers. Nationality-wise, we represent Singapore, Indonesia, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Sweden and Australia.

Our mandate here is fundraising for UN Women projects in the region, and public education. For example, our projects have included support for Cambodians and for the tsunami victims in Aceh, Indonesia.

Is sex trafficking really an issue in Singapore?

Singapore is an importer of victims from around the region; the victims don't come from Singapore. They are lured here with promises of employment, sometimes as domestic workers but more often in the service industry: entertainers, waitresses or karaoke bar hostesses. As most of them come in on social visit passes, which they subsequently overstay, they may be

categorised and dealt with as immigration offenders rather than as victims of sex trafficking.

Victim support services have been lacking, but migrant worker bodies such as HOME (Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics) and TWC2 (Transient Workers Count Too) have started to help. The government ministries are also stepping up their services for victims.

Two years ago, there was little awareness of this issue. Now, it's regularly discussed in the paper, and the government has recently established its own body – the Taskforce on Trafficking in Persons, or TIP – to address the problem. TIP is moving fast and doing great things. Traditionally, embassies have been the first port of call for these women in distress, but we are on the cusp of seeing the whole system changing.

What do you have lined up for the SNOW gala dinner on Friday, 7 October?

It's our sixth one, and gets better every year! As in previous years, we have invited a group of well-known guest chefs to cook up some very high-end gourmet food. Capella Hotel is the venue for the second year in a row. The Great Gatsby is this year's theme: hats, pearls, moonshine cocktails – it should be a glorious night. A Silver table for ten costs \$5,000; a Gold is \$10,000.

Funds raised go towards paying for all the expenses associated with UN Women's activities in Singapore. We will also be supporting a livelihood programme for bamboo weavers in Cambodia, and Anuradha Koirala's Maiti Nepal, through which she has rescued and rehabilitated hundreds of girls tricked or sold into the sex trade.

Katrina Dick, Australia

Volunteer



What is your background?

I'm a social worker by trade, and initially did a diploma in Welfare. I came here for the first time for a couple of years from 1996, and in 1999 I went to London, where I worked with people affected by drugs, alcohol and homelessness, for a year and a half before returning to Sydney. There I worked in youth drugs and alcohol.

Just the opposite of Pia, who was one of the youngest in her year, I had ten years in the field before I did my bachelor's degree at the University of NSW; I was the oldest in my class – with a baby on my hip! Just as I finished my degree, I had my second child, and soon after that moved back here with my husband Haydn in 2007.

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Why volunteering?

When I first came here with Haydn, we weren't yet married and I wasn't allowed to work, so I gave school talks for the Singapore Planned Parenthood Association as a volunteer; at that time, the schools farmed out their sex education. And when we came back, Baxter (now 8) and Tallulah (4) were very small.

When they were five and two years old respectively, I started volunteer work for UNIFEM. Generally, for most jobs in welfare the employers here prefer you to have PR (permanent residence), and I didn't. I also didn't want to work full-time. What's more, I saw this as an opportunity to jump into an area where I would not have been given a job, and as a result I have learnt so much in the past two and a half years.

What do you do?

At the start, I was part of a team of volunteers giving school talks on a fairly set programme of topics. But that has become more fluid, and we are responding more to what the schools want. One day, I might be talking to an audience of 400 kids about the basics of human trafficking, and the next to a small class of senior geography students about the economics of migration.

I've relished being allowed to also pick up other projects and run with them; it's been an opportunity for me personally to learn about things I previously knew nothing about.

For example, I jumped in to help with the initial information-gathering for the STOP campaign. Then, having friends in advertising, I put my hand up to establish the website www.soundout.sg, which is UN Women's own ongoing campaign against sex trafficking. By calling on mostly unsigned local bands and musicians to donate music to the website, we have been able to reach out to untapped audiences, and the response has been incredible. Participants have spread the news through their own websites and via Facebook, and it is still growing.

We have fewer volunteers now than when I started, as the staff and intern strength has grown; they come and go, and some come in just to assist with particular projects. Even I come and go – I just had two months off with the kids over the summer. My work keeps me as busy as I want to be, and that's the joy of volunteering.

But I can't just switch off and ignore my email, because for some projects I may be the only point of contact. It's an ongoing and continuous commitment. ■

To find out more about UN Women and how you can get involved in its various activities, or to enquire about the SNOW Gala Dinner on 7 October 2011, visit www.unwomen-nc.org.sg.

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