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Sr. Milagros García runs Kreditá na bo with her sisters from the Adorers in Mindelo, Cape Verde. (Dana Wachter)



by Dana Wachter

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Sr. Milagros García throws her head back and shakes it with a soft smile when asked to describe an example of someone she's helped in her 37 years of working with vulnerable women.

"So many stories," she said.

For the past year, she has directed Kreditá na bo, a day center in Mindelo, Cape Verde, that works with sexually exploited women and younger women and girls at risk of getting into dangerous or unethical work in the Mindelo area.

Running the 10-year-old program is her first mission away from her home country of Spain. Her previous experience working with vulnerable women through her congregation, Adoratrices, Esclavas del Santísimo Sacramento y de la Caridad, moved her to multiple cities in Spain, doing similar work there.

Through a translator, García, a native Spanish speaker, described to Global Sisters Report a busy lifestyle in her adopted home of Mindelo. She and two other sisters (from Portugal and Spain) and a team of laypeople (staff and volunteers) provide professional training, like sewing or cooking, and computer and financial classes; connect women with relevant job skills training; offer group and individual counseling; educate the Mindelo community about the dangers of trafficking and prostitution; and work with local and national police and government to expand awareness about human trafficking and crack down on traffickers.

"The moment we start working with [women], they have to leave prostitution," García said. She said those who finish their program have usually found sustainable work or have rejoined their families or communities in safer capacities.

The organization was started in 2009 by García's sister Adorers, who also arrived in Cape Verde from Spain and Portugal. It is part of the congregation's broader mission to help facilitate women's rights, give vulnerable women the dignity and respect they deserve, and create social change, all in the name of Christ.



Kreditá na bo's pink building with beautiful flowers that the sisters maintain stands out in its Mindelo neighborhood in Cape Verde. (Dana Wachter)

In its beginnings, the program offered job training for lower-income women in Mindelo, but by 2016, it began to focus more on women in vulnerable situations, especially those likely to enter prostitution. It began receiving financial support from the country's Ministry of Justice; took on the name Kreditá na bo, meaning "Believe in you" in the local Creole language; and offered a more holistic approach to helping women, adding structured social and psychological support in conjunction with employment referrals and trainings.

Kreditá na bo is not a host house, meaning women do not stay there. There is one room with a small bed in case a woman needs an emergency shelter, but García said the room usually serves as a library. Rather, the day program is meant to introduce women to safer ways to earn a living and give opportunities for training to do so.

Kreditá na bo is one of the women-centric programs the Adorers run around the world. The sisters have created at least 70 similar projects to offer support to vulnerable women in 24 countries on four continents.

"The women that we work with are women on the street, women excluded from society, and they need help," García said.

She said in Mindelo, the biggest city on the island of *São Vicente*, most women Kreditá na bo helps work as prostitutes to make their own money.

García said she sees the Adorers' mission as a central piece to her life: Helping women just as Christ helps the broken, she sees herself as all women and knows she needs to help those who have been cast off by society and are suffering horrible things.

"It's not just my work; it's my mission from God," García said.

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Offering options

García said she doesn't want to just help women professionally, but in all aspects, to help rebuild from helpless or precarious situations, to a complete and emotionally sound person.

Kreditá na bo works with more than 125 women at any given time, and García said the women may spend a couple of years in various aspects of their programming and processes.

The women generally range from 16 to 40 years old, but García said they have helped 14-year-olds with babies onto paths to education and safer ways to support their families. There are some women older than 40 who continue sex work, and García's team tries to help them get training and services to leave sex work behind,

too.

She and her team meet the women where they are, even going to their homes to better understand their families' needs and to best direct them to services, whether at Kreditá na bo or in the community.



Top left: Every year on March 8, International Women's Day, the sisters of Kreditá na bo travel to women's homes to give them hugs. Top right: Clients of Kreditá na bo attend a session on legal information. Bottom left: Children of clients attend a nurse-led health workshop. Bottom right: The commander of the 1st Military Region and his medical team visit Kreditá na bo June 21, part of a new medical partnership. (Photos courtesy of Kreditá na bo)

García said most of the women they work with do not work for bosses as they do in her native Spain; in Mindelo, she said, they work for themselves. It's not organized, which means it's hidden, she said.

The women may work in prostitution for additional income, to afford the latest smartphone or designer shoes, or as a way to sustain themselves and care for their families. It is those women who have not found any other option to provide for

themselves whom García and her team serve most.

"There are the ones that are for survival. And we work for the ones that are for survival," said Denise Oliveira Centeio, a psychologist with Kreditá na bo, facilitating group and individual therapy sessions to create an atmosphere where the women can speak freely together, share experiences and support each other.

Many younger women, Oliveira Centeio and García said, choose to leave school and seek clients to make money, whether for their families or themselves.



Denise Oliveira Centeio, who is from Mindelo, serves as the psychologist for Kreditá na bo. (Dana Wachter)

The women of Kreditá na bo said women in Mindelo may have to care for families alone, without their children's fathers. Some women hear of the organization through neighbors, but García's team also seeks out those in need. They run programs in the local jail and walk the streets at night to talk to women on sidewalks as they wait for clients.

The facility does not openly share its location to avoid men who may have hired the women in the past or other negative influences finding the women once they have joined the program.

Bringing awareness to trafficking

Oliveira Centeio described Cape Verde's location off the west coast of Africa as a stop for people who may be trafficking women from Africa to places in Europe. Since it was discovered and settled in the mid-1400s, the country had been known as a place to refuel en route to Europe or to the Americas.

Oliveira Centeio said people who work in the airports in Cape Verde may not be as aware of the problem as they should be; they don't know how to recognize trafficking, so it passes. That's one aspect the team at Kreditá na bo hopes can change with awareness.



The Portuguese discovered Cape Verde in the 15th century. Mindelo became a port as traders made stops en route to Europe or the Americas. (Dana Wachter)

"So [many Cape Verdeans] don't know about it, but it happens," said Oliveira Centeio, who is not a sister but said she believes strongly in Kreditá na bo's meaning and purpose.

She said there are other organizations in Mindelo working with vulnerable women, but theirs is the only one educating the community about trafficking.

Trafficking is an issue the Adorers work closely with in their organizations in other parts of the world, so although their clients have not been trafficked, the Kreditá na bo team wants to bring awareness in Cape Verde.

García nods knowingly to a photo of a billboard along a major corridor in Praia, Cape Verde's capital, which shows bound wrists and the headline: "*Tráfico de pessoas*," or "trafficking." Underneath, it reads: "*Temos todos de combater este fenomeno*" ("We all have to combat this phenomenon").



An anti-trafficking billboard along a major corridor in Praia, Cape Verde's capital, is part of a partnership between Kreditá na bo and the Cape Verdean Ministry of Justice. (Dana Wachter)

She said the billboard and its slogan is part of a partnership with the Cape Verdean Ministry of Justice, which also started local recognition of the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, July 30. They go out to the community and spread awareness about signs of trafficking to look out for, march down public streets and carry signs.

Cape Verde, an archipelago, was upgraded from Tier 3 to Tier 2 on the 2018 Trafficking in Persons Report by the U.S. State Department. In a description, the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, describes Cape Verdean adults and children involved in prostitution, and foreign nationals, especially from West Africa, trafficked to Cape Verde for sex tourism. International tourism has been a rising industry in Cape Verde, with mostly European visitors frequenting the country's many beaches.

The upgrade comes from researchers who found that the government has taken substantial steps to combat trafficking, including education campaigns and increased laws and penalties for sex trafficking and slavery.



The beaches of Cape Verde draw tourism, which the U.N. reports may include sex tourism. (Dana Wachter)

The education piece is a big one for García and her team. She's seen younger women get into prostitution just like their mothers and neighbors to make a living. While she said she hasn't seen trafficking among her clients, she knows it well from her time in Spain.

"Here in Mindelo, they don't know about trafficking because [victims are] not arriving. In Europe, they're arriving," García said. "Many are African in Europe. They come from lots of countries."

Most trainings of Kreditá na bo run from the end of September through July, and during the short August-September hiatus, García's team regroups and analyzes the prior year, determining which programs need to be changed or updated. For example, this year, there is only one woman in the Mindelo jail, so they decided that their previous jail-based programming is not necessary. Instead, the team now works with those who have been released from prison as part of their regular

programs.



One of the main streets in Mindelo from the steps of the former governor's palace, now a museum (Dana Wachter)

They also only have so much funding to keep the lights on and water flowing. García's congregation helps by sending money, and donations are made locally. She is also applying for international grants that could help them serve more women.

García said she could be in Mindelo at Kreditá na bo for another three to six years, but if she needs more time there, she will take it. She said she wants to bring up women who have fallen, to help give them their lives back.

"Christ helped. He helps the broken and women on the street," García said. "And we're all women. We're all the same. We have to help each other."

[Dana Wachter is a freelance journalist and digital storyteller based in London, Ontario.]