

Anna's Story

My name is Anna and this is my story.

I was born in a small village in West Africa. My family were very poor. My father was a community development worker and used to support the family. When he became ill, my mother and I would burn wood to make charcoal, and sell it at the side of the road, to make money.

A few years ago a man saw me at the side of the road and told me I could do better for myself than selling charcoal. I did not know what he meant. He told me that he had restaurants in Europe and that he was looking for young women to work in his restaurants. I went home and spoke to my mother about the offer. My mother was pleased as it meant I could earn money. The day after the man came to visit my parents and told them about taking me to Europe. He told my mother he wanted to help me. He told my parents the first year's wages would be used to pay for my travel but then I could go wherever I wanted to earn money. Both my parents were happy. My father had had a stroke and had become so sick that he could no longer get out of bed. I wanted to work to support my family and keep them safe.

Over the following few weeks the man kept in contact with my family and brought us food and money. On his 3rd visit to see us, he told me I should be ready next time he came as we would be leaving. He came the next day and we travelled to the city. The following day we took a plane to France. I did not have my documents, instead the man kept them. Once in France we caught a bus to a town where we went to a big house. There were many small rooms partitioned off with ply-wood. Inside the house we met another two girls now making eight of us. Then later another four arrived.

We soon realised that we were not going to be working in a restaurant, but would be forced to work as prostitutes. We were made to sleep with many men every single night. If you said no they would hold you down or the boss would beat you.

After a few months I tried to escape, however the receptionist saw me leave and contacted the boss. He caught me and beat me in the street.

A few days later a customer who visited regularly, took pity when he saw my injuries and allowed me to use his mobile phone. I managed to contact my mother by phoning the pastor from a neighbouring village. I told my mother everything that had happened. I went to the boss with another lady and we asked how much we owed, as we thought we must have paid a lot of our debt off by now. He was very angry and beat me again. He told us we did not have the right to ask him. He would tell us when the debt was paid.

After many months the boss came and told us to pack as we were going to be moved. Most of the girls were taken elsewhere but me and another girl went with the boss to London. When we arrived we took another train to Manchester. We were taken to a big, new, empty house. The man he left us with was not as strict as the previous boss and would let us go to the shop to buy things. The man would come with us and wait outside the shop. The shopkeeper would let us use euros and said he could change them for us. About two weeks later the man told us he was going out to see someone. This is when we planned our escape. We ran from the house early on a Sunday morning. My friend said we should tell the police but I was scared. We agreed to try and get to France as the other girl had a client who might help. We got to Waterloo train station where I was asked for my documents. This is when the police were called and I was arrested.

After my arrest I was sent to prison. I contacted the pastor in my village again and asked him to tell my mother where I was and asked him to arrange a day I could speak to her. He told me my mother had passed through his village with my daughter. They were carrying bags and running away, as some men had been to my home and threatened my family. My mother had fled because she was scared. When I was arrested I was to be deported, but when the judge heard my story, he suspended my deportation. I no longer know where my mother or daughter are. From prison I was put into the care of the Salvation Army. I have many health issues now, all of which I now get help with. I receive counselling as well as medical health care. I have now decided to go and stay with friends while I look for work. Maybe soon I will try and find my daughter and bring her to live with me.