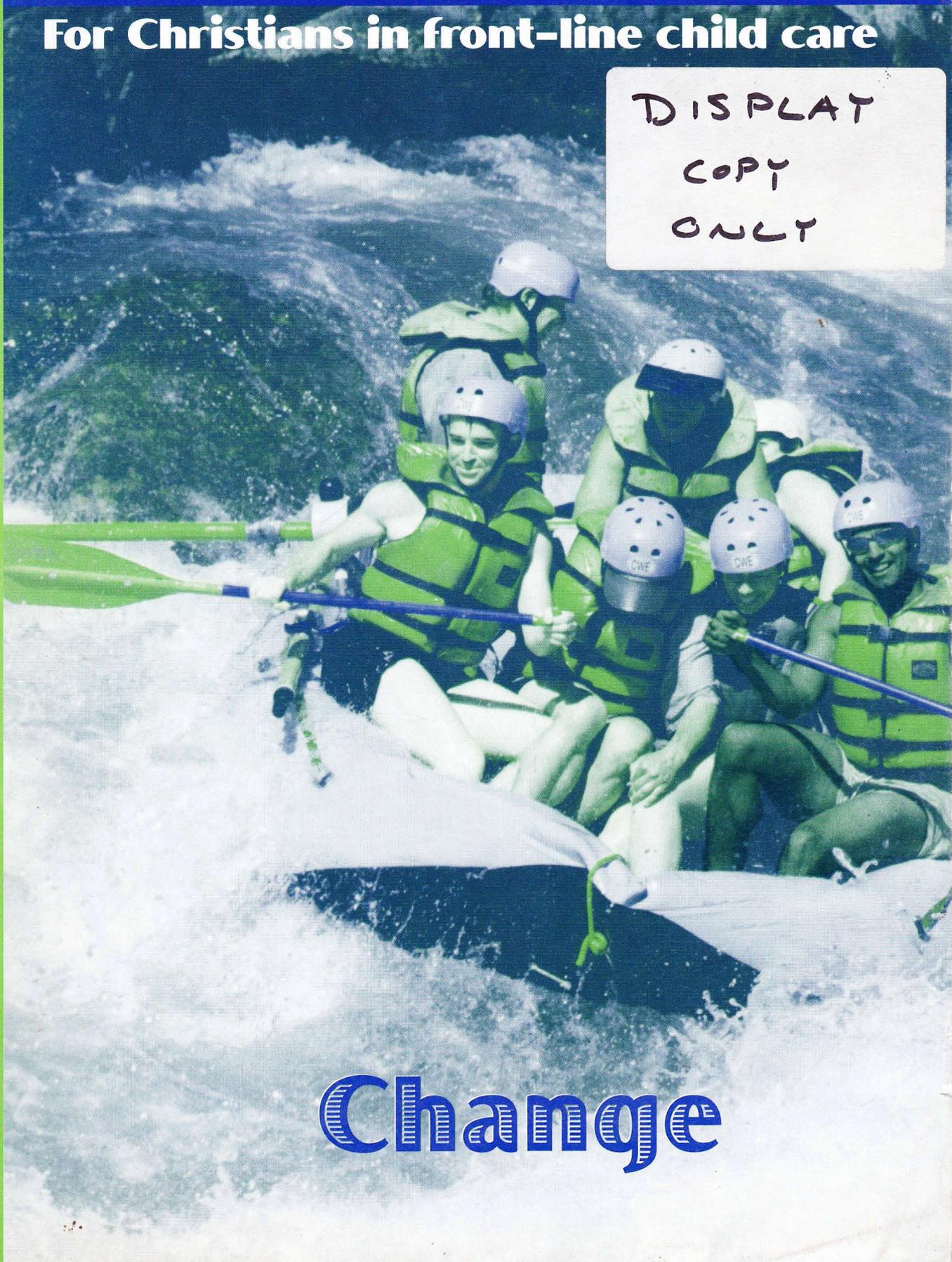


REACHING

Children at Risk

For Christians in front-line child care

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Change

Listening

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For Children



How can we help young people adjust to changes in environment and lifestyle, to cope with the transitions between a crisis situation, care programmes, and re-entry into the community? Here, we'll explore this question in relation to girls who have been sexually exploited.

More and more projects now provide temporary residential care for child victims of sexual exploitation. Offering much needed respite from a chaotic environment, these projects give the children opportunity to learn a new vocation. However, both entering the care home and then leaving again can be traumatic. How can these adjustments be made easier?

Coming into the centre

In one such project, each girl is given three options: to come into the centre (and agree to its conditions), return to her family, or return to the brothel from which she came. This is a difficult change process. Despite much abuse, the brothel may still provide a sense of security, plus friendships with other girls who have shared painful experiences. The longer she has spent in the brothel, the harder it is for her to leave.

Some girls only manage to stay in the care centre for a few days. Many remain, however: support is provided by their peers as well as by staff. Other girls who have

“What do you think would equip you in order to leave?”

been in the centre for some time can empathise and are able to help the new arrivals to adjust. An enormous amount of energy is also invested by staff in counselling, ensuring that each girl knows she is accepted and loved.

Moving on in life

We asked the ten girls currently in the centre: “What do you think would equip you in order to leave?” Eight of the girls mentioned God’s help (to the delight of the staff!), and the same number identified tools and skills related to their vocational study. Other responses included ‘being more respectful of others’, ‘better understanding in solving problems’, ‘understanding of health needs and human rights’, ‘improved reading, writing

and maths’, and ‘skills in cooking, gardening and raising livestock’.

Becoming advocates of change

Most such residential centres provide a temporary stepping stone. Children and young people come from their own community, and have to return to it. Helping girls to become more resilient is one key to facilitating re-entry.

Changing opinions in their communities is another – a key both to increased acceptance of ex-prostitutes, and to the reduction of future child sexual exploitation.

The girls were willing to talk about the issues of how they got into the exploitative situation and about the inappropriate prejudice they encountered when they were the victims. They said they would like to speak to parents, to other children of their age and even to adults in authority. They believed their experiences gave their voice credibility. And so did we. These girls needed to be heard.



1. This issue was raised in your responses to our recent survey.

