



Voices of Rural Women Migrants
Their Voices, Struggles and
Reclaiming their Rights!



CARAM Asia

Labour Migration and Displacement Workshop

1st Asian Rural Women's Conference (ARWC) March 2008

Arakkonam, Tamil Nadu, India

FOREWORD

CARAM Asia at the ARWC

Migration occurs under circumstances of poverty, unemployment, underemployment, economic and political instability, landlessness or the deterioration of the environment. All of which has intensified under the process of economic and political globalisation. Declining living standards and increasing unemployment rates are key outcomes of neo-liberal policies forcing poor populations to seek work opportunities abroad.

The patriarchal context of neo-liberal globalisation strategies and policies must be examined. Influenced by market fundamentalism and pro-capitalism, the business sector prey on women labour as a means to gain from a workforce which is unskilled, cheap and deemed as easily subjugated by state and employers. Under patriarchal policies and structures, women migrant workers work in conditions without appropriate legal and labour protection and remain unrecognised. Furthermore women's sexual and reproductive health and rights are violated through various protective immigration policies. While women send higher amounts of remittances than their male counterparts, it has not improved the overall status and power relations upon their return home.

Neo-liberal strategies have impacted Asian Rural Women in the harshest manner:

- The commodification of women's labour whereby profits rest on women's labour and sexuality.
- Rural women to suffer mounting hunger and food insecurity, escalating unemployment and are forced into bonded forms of labour.
- Forced migration and trafficking of women whereby women face brutal exploitation, abuse and harassment.
- Women's work that is unrecognised, care centered or focused on services for men as in entertainment and sex.

Rural women are resisting and rejecting the capitalist agenda of profits and power and the illusion of development. Rural women are challenged to consolidate the strengths in the resistance against globalisation and imperialist forces, highlighting their concerns to avoid being set aside and ignored, and sending out the message that women are resisting injustices and not afraid to let their voices be heard. The rural women's movement is strengthening at the local and national level and is emerging as a global force and it is the will of the women that will determine the change.

CARAM's participation at the ARWC is aimed to address issues concerning labour migration and displacement in the context of globalisation. CARAM through a workshop on Labour Migration and Displacement at the ARWC will facilitate a process with Foreign Domestic Workers, spouses, trafficked women, positive migrants, returnee women migrants and local rural women to:

1. Facilitate a process to deepen and sharpen perspectives on globalisation and migration, the struggle for equality and right to land, right to livelihoods and safe working environment, workers' rights, elimination of violence and sexual exploitation of women.
2. Develop collective strategies on reclaiming their rights and build solidarity and unity among Asian rural women.

CARAM through its taskforces Migration Health and Globalisation, Foreign Domestic Workers, Empowerment of Positive Migrants/Spouses and State of Health will continue to engage rural women caught in the nexus of migration and globalisation.

Bangladesh

Shamima Akter – Former FDW

No to Forced Migration of Rural Women

My name is Shamima, I am from a remote village of Bangladesh. We are six with four children in the family. My husband was a farmer. He had a piece of agricultural land. He used to cultivate rice and vegetables on that land. We had a hardship to run our family. We couldn't profit from agriculture anymore because we had to buy seeds, fertilizer, insecticides at a higher cost from companies. So my husband decided to go abroad for work.

My husband discussed the possibilities for him to work in Saudi. My relative suggested sending me to Saudi instead of my husband. My husband agreed and sent me to Saudi. He said if I go abroad the cost will be less than that of my husband. My husband agreed and sent me to Saudi Arabia.

I worked in an Arabian house in Saudi Arabia. I used to work hard from dawn to dusk. I was not allowed to rest and had no leave. Moreover, my mistress (Mama) always treated me badly. I was not given food and was mistreated by the children.

Once Baba came into my room and tortured me. I decided to run away. A woman whom I called Aunty offered me a good job with high salary. So I ran away but found myself in a place where I was nothing but selling sex.

When I came back to my country I was offered training from a migrant organisation. There I met many women with different stories of exploitation. I got back and learnt to stand up again. Now we are more than 200 women working together so that no more women face the same conditions. We are also running a collective income generation project to earn money for ourselves.

I am here to share solidarity.

To work with Rural Women from Asia.

To build greater UNITY and say NO TO FORCED MIGRATION of rural women and

To RECLAIM the Rural economy to ensure livelihood in our communities.

Burma

Moe Moe - A live-in domestic worker in Chiang Mai (An excerpt from the report of Burmese Women's Union—*Caught Between Two Hells*)

I don't think I know anyone from my village who did not have a difficult time surviving because of dire poverty. Every day was a hard struggle for us to get enough money to survive. The cost of living in Burma is very high and our earnings are nowhere near enough. My family could not survive on a single income so I thought I would work in rice paddy fields to help support my family. I worked over 12 hours straight each day from morning to evening and was only paid 500 kyat a day (50 cent usd).

When the military asked our farms to be relocated we were devastated. The paddy fields near our village were the only source of livelihood for us. We first did not know why we could not continue to grow rice on our paddy fields. Later, we found out that the paddy fields were to be replaced by a highway for a mega dam construction by foreign companies. We were later told that villagers from my village were being asked to work on the road construction and also that we could not say no to the military.

I decided to leave my village as our paddy fields were destroyed, so we had no way to survive. I am the eldest in my family; I had to support my family. I picked Thailand as my destination country since it is the closest country to my village. A man told me that he would help me get a job and I had to pay him 5000 baht for his help. He promised me a job in a ceramic factory, but when we reached to Thailand, he made me work at a house as a domestic helper. I could not refuse as I owed the man who brought me to Thailand 5000 baht.

My bosses treat me based on their mood. If it was a good day at work, and they made money, I got through the day without being yelled at. I never had a day off. I worked 14 hours a day. I was the last one to eat and sleep every day. I felt very weak from having to work hard. I found myself working harder than I used to in the farm back in my village. I prayed everyday for my health. Getting sick was not option for me. I was so afraid of the injuries arising from my work.

One day I was in the shower, my male boss asked me to bring a cup of water. I could not refuse even though I was not fully dressed; my female boss asked me to attend to their orders immediately. I went to deliver a cup of water. My boss held my hand and started stroking it. I felt so scared, shamed, and violated. I pinched his hand to release myself and ran to the room to quickly put on clothes to run off. Luckily, he did not try to chase me. I was fortunate to know a few other domestic workers from my country working in the same neighbourhood. I went to them for help. They took me in their employer's house for a while, and then they helped me move to a safe house for escaped women like myself to seek shelter.

I was fortunate to have friends who knew about that safe house. I stayed there for weeks while I was trying to find another job. This is where I learned that most women from my country are in similar

situation as me. We had nowhere to go in a foreign land, and we needed to work to support our families. Although we are victims of human rights violations, we do not report these violations as we fear deportation. Most importantly, I learned from my friends at the safe house that although we are rural women and have no education, we are brave women because we left our homes to become a breadwinner.

We are strong because we endure all types of violence and discrimination for our families and communities. We need the income so desperately for our families. We help each other in time of need and share everything we have among ourselves, whatever little that we may have. We fight among ourselves, but we become united again quickly. We know that we have to be united as a community to survive. We dare to dream. We all have a dream to go back to our motherland that is free and peaceful, one day. The only way of restoring our happiness and escape from misery as undocumented rural migrant women in foreign countries, is to go back home to our families in Burma. We will continue to wait for the time to come while we remain strong and helpful to other women like us. When forces around us are so powerful and hard for us to fight back, only things we hold on to survive are our hope, will to survive, and solidarity among ourselves.

Indonesia

Nining Ivana – Former Migrant Worker

Broken Dreams but not a Broken Spirit

My name is Nining Ivana. I'm 24 years old. Five years ago I worked in Malaysia as a migrant worker. I had a lot of dreams and hopes when I decided to be a migrant worker. I thought I would make my family proud by working abroad.

After graduating from high school, I went off to work abroad right away. A year gone by in Malaysia, and I found it to be a different as many things were still unfamiliar. As a migrant worker, I had to endure many violations. Both psychological and sexual abuses were carried out by Indonesians and Malaysians.

I realise now that women migrant workers are extremely vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases. We were unaware of issues related to sexual and reproductive health and rights. Many of us were in relationships with Indonesians or Malaysians. We embarked in relationships to help reduce the cost of living in Malaysia. Many of us became mistresses.

Entering the sixth month, my physical condition worsened, I didn't know why. Did I not have enough sleep because I worked long hours, or did I have an illness? I decided to go for a medical check up. In

May 2004, I urged myself to have a lab check. The result apparently had nothing to worry about, only acidity and minor cholesterol problems. Contrary with the test result, my condition worsened day by day. I even started to vomit blood and the doctor couldn't give me a proper diagnosis.

Soon after, I decided to go back to Jakarta because all my savings were used to cover medical expenses. Even my parents had to send some money for me to buy the air ticket and pay my debts to the agent and the employer in Malaysia. I was in debt and was charged a penalty by my employer because I broke the contract which was for 2 years. But I had no choice and had to go back due to my illness.

I went back to Indonesia in June 2004. I decided to rest totally. After 6 months in Indonesia, I decided to go back to work in Malaysia in a different factory. The pre-departure process was different this time, I had to undergo several steps of test including interview, psychology and medical check up. I passed the first and second step of the test smoothly. But I failed the medical check up. The doctor diagnosed me with HIV and I was not allowed to work in Malaysia. I did the second HIV test in December 2004 and the result was still the same.

Yes, I am an HIV-positive person! Someone living with HIV! How was I infected? I even seriously considered ending my life, I felt useless as a human. I was very sure that everyone would hate me and be afraid to interact with me. I was a mess and could not accept myself, or my situation. However with time, I met other positive people and they became my source of strength to survive. I have been on ARV therapy for 3 years now and I feel empowered now.

Until this very moment the trauma of the violation and discrimination faced as an Indonesian women migrant worker in Malaysia haunts me. We are often seen as loose women and are vulnerable to sexual advances and sexually transmitted diseases because our rights as women workers are denied and taken away. There is also an underground sex industry amongst migrant workers, Indonesians and Malaysian clients.

Now I work for the Partisan Foundation. A NGO for HIV-AIDS prevention which cooperates with prisons in Jakarta and Tangerang. My situation has enabled me to give out information to other people regarding HIV, to prevent them from infection. My message today is: Protect the rights of women workers. All women migrant workers must gain access and education related to HIV. Our sexual and reproductive health and rights must be protected. Women workers must strengthen their network and they should not be forced to sacrifice their rights and health for the sake of money.

Philippines

Mary Joy Barcelona – Trafficked Survivor

A Woman's journey: a victim, survivor and an advocate

I had a simple dream and that was to finish my studies and become a teacher. Unfortunately, it was not an easy dream to fulfill. After I graduated from high school in 1991, my father left us for another woman. Without my father around, my mother worked to support all of us, her six children. I saw how hard she had to struggle to keep us all together. I wanted to help my mother and still be able to finish my studies.

Armed with courage and determination, I went to Manila to try my luck. I planned to work in the morning as a nanny and pursue my studies in the evening. I lived with a cousin, who works in Japan. My cousin was working as an entertainer in Japan. She was earning a lot and was able to afford a lot of luxuries. She told me that her work in Japan was easy. Thus, I entertained the thought of going to Japan as well. Maybe, I can work there for six months, and if I earn enough, I will go back to school.

My cousin promised to help me land a job in Japan. She brought me to a promotions agency and acted as my manager. I trained as a dancer at a promotions agency. During one of the auditions at the agency, I was one of those who passed the audition. On June 20, 1995, I left the Philippines for Japan.

Immediately upon arrival at the Narita Airport, my passport and other documents were confiscated by the promoter. On the very night of my arrival, I had to report for work. I thought that I would be brought to a hotel as stipulated in my contract, instead I was brought to a club in Gunma.

In the Philippines, I signed a contract to work as a dancer in a hotel. But I was brought to a club to work as a hostess. Never in my dreams have I imagined myself working as one. I was later told by the “timers” or those who have worked in Japan for more than one contract, that this is the usual practice. Entertainers like us are brought to other clubs to work. They call this practice “flying booking.”

At the club, I would serve the customers – prepare drinks, drink with them, sit beside them or on their laps, or sometimes go out on dates with them. I never danced as stipulated in my contract. Dinner everyday was at 3:00 in the afternoon because we have to clean the club before it opens at 6:00 in the evening. Cleaning was not part of our work as per our contract but we could not do anything about it. Our boss said we had no right to complain.

My fellow entertainers and I did not receive our salaries on time. Our Japanese promoters withheld our salaries so that we do not escape. We got our salaries only after the six-month contract. At the

club, we were required to go out on *dohan*, an afternoon date. It was a club policy. It's either I go out on *dohan* or I will be meted a fine.

I had to endure many sexual advances. There was one time a customer I went out with on *dohan* brought me to a hotel. He started kissing me but I resisted. Fortunately, I was able to convince him to bring me back to the club. There was also an incident when a customer brought me to his house. He started showing me pictures of his former Filipino girlfriends, after which he proceeded to show me a pornographic video. I insisted that he brings me back to the club. Although I was very much afraid, I was ready to fight him.

I was forced to do a lot of things out of necessity. Much as I wanted to resist, I was also afraid. I did not have my passport and other documents with me. Inside the club, I had to do what the other entertainers do. I had to endure the unwanted touches and caresses of our male customers in order to get tips.

When my six-month contract was finished, I immediately returned to the Philippines. My family and friends eagerly awaited my return. They were so happy to see me again. But I did not have money when I returned home. Almost all my earnings were used to pay for my debts at the promotions agency. They said I had to pay for my training and the processing of my documents. Almost nothing was left of my six-month salary. I decided to go back to my province in Isabela, north of the Philippines.

I thought that by being back in the Philippines, things would be better. I was wrong. I was judged by other people. My neighbors talked behind my back. They said nasty things about me but I just ignored them. I paid attention to the small investments I made. I had a small store and I bought a tricycle. I promised myself, I will work hard to achieve my dreams.

I enrolled in college and worked as a student aid. But in school, some people ridiculed me. They still judged me because of my past. They called me names like "Japayuki." At first, I endured all those remarks. But eventually, I gave up. To make things worse, my family misspent all my savings. The small investments I had were soon gone. And then, my mother died. I was devastated. I felt that I had nobody to turn to anymore. After her burial, I decided to start to re-build my life. I quit school and left for Manila.

I became an active member of DAWN in 1999. I was warmly accepted in DAWN. I was never judged for my past and instead was given all the support I needed to heal myself. I availed myself of DAWN's skills trainings, workshops, and seminars. Such opportunities brought back my self-esteem and self-confidence.

From that time on, I have never looked back. From being a member of the Sikhay alternative livelihood program of DAWN, I became a member of its staff. I am now the coordinator of DAWN's alternative livelihood project. I am also an active member of Teatro Akebono and its director.

DAWN has provided me with opportunities for self growth and development. The seminars and workshops I attended together with other women members of the organization helped me a lot. I also got a chance to meet other people through the conferences I participated in. I became stronger and more confident. Soon, I became an advocate of women's issues. I would speak on the issue of women entertainers in Japan and share my experiences as a former entertainer. Although some people would look down on me and criticize me for speaking up on issues, I continued with what I was doing because I do not want others to experience what I went through in Japan.

DAWN encouraged me to pursue my dream. They encouraged me to continue my studies. I enrolled at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. In December 2006, I finally graduated with a degree in B.S. Entrepreneurial Management. I may not become the teacher that I dreamed of, but I know that I will continue teaching, helping, and inspiring others to make the most of what they have and can do.

Sri Lanka

Konsahiya William – Former Domestic Worker in Malaysia

Migration – A network of Greedy Agents

I am Konsahiya I came to Malaysia in search for better wages to help my family and to pursue my dreams of better livelihood. Soon after graduating from school I looked for work in my hometown but as a minority I found it to be extremely difficult to find work. Opportunities were limited because of my ethnicity. The conflict made this worse. At least the men of my ethnicity had some work but as a woman it was even harder to find work at home. I tried to look for a job at home but could not find one.

Within my group of friends there were 24 of us all women that were at some point looking for work overseas. We were encouraged to work overseas. The government promoted it as an option because of the money sent. It was difficult to earn decent income in my own country even with high school education.

I tried to help my father run a small family grocery shop but customers were unable to pay their grocery bills and so the shop could not make much money. My dream for a better life led me to work abroad. My eldest sister had made the same choice and was working in Singapore so I thought this would be best for me too.

I arrived in Singapore in October 2007 and paid 17 500 Sri Lankan Rupees to a Sri Lankan agent. This payment was only for insurance and agent fees it did not include my ticket and did not guarantee a job. In Singapore I had to go through a compulsory written test. I failed the written exam and was given 2 choices. Return to Sri Lanka and then return to Singapore after 30 days or go to

Malaysia and return to Singapore after 30 days to retake the exam. I could not return to Sri Lanka it would have cost a lot. I opted to go to Malaysia. This is how I became caught in the web of greedy agents.

An agent in Singapore offered to help me get a job in Malaysia for a fee of S\$450. I was transferred from one agent to another in Malaysia all of them saying they will help me. I finally got a job in November 2007. I was informed by my new employer that I would receive RM 1000 a month but I had to work very hard and long hours.

I had to tend to 9 people staying in the house. Worse still after 2 months I found out that my employer practiced black magic. With me in the house there was another domestic worker from Indonesia but she became mentally ill. My employer said she was possessed by spirits and to protect me I should allow him to draw my blood to “feed the spirits”. I became very traumatised and scared. I wanted no part of this and told my employer. He tried to persuade me to stay and said he would protect me but I insisted on leaving. I asked him about my salary several times as I worked for 2 months. He insisted he gave my salary to the agent. He finally called the agent to terminate my contract.

Finally the agent picked me up from my employer’s house. The agent intimidated me and warned me not to ask my employer about my salary. Once I left the house I realised there were many agents involved. Whenever I asked about my salary I was asked to speak to another agent. One of the agent informed that my employer paid only half the amount promised to me. But when I called my employer he said he paid the agent the full amount. The agents kept confusing me I did not even know who was really representing me. Furthermore one of them told me that he purchased me for a sum of RM 4000. Therefore I was in debt to him and was bonded because they held on to my documents. I was threatened, scolded and verbally abused whenever I tried to find help from my sister in Singapore.

I found out about Tenaganita an NGO helping women like me and called them for help. I am currently in Malaysia fighting for my rights to the salary which rightfully belongs to me and I desire to return home to my family in Sri Lanka.

I tell my friends when you leave to work abroad success is a matter of luck. There are no certainties and even the contract will not protect you. Your rights are taken away, you are alone, your health is at risk. Women are not protected and the whole migration system is weak. It does not care of your needs as a human being. You are a foreigner and treated with no rights. Agents are free to do as they please. They lie, extort, buy and sell you. Only money talks.

I have told my friends at home not to leave Sri Lanka for work. You may have little money in Sri Lanka but with a close community we can help each other overcome obstacles.

Moving Forward

These testimonies aim to provide women migrants a voice and platform to share their stories. Some of them could not personally attend the ARWC but had compelling experiences and lessons to share. Their stories vividly explain their struggles for survival and their hopes and dreams as rural women. They share common hardships and hope for solidarity and community action.

The life stories of these women portray only a tip of the iceberg of issues concerning migration and globalisation confronting rural women today. Their stories sketch some of the causes of migration and we can trace through their stories the impact of neo-liberal globalisation on rural women. The lack of job opportunities at home, disintegration of the rural economy, hijacking of the rural economy by elites and MNCs, debt bondage by agents, trafficking, the reliance on remittances, the aggressive labour export policies pushing women to migrate are all symptoms of a failing socio-economic system.

The benefits of economic globalisation have not been universally shared and neo-liberal policies have failed to advance the rights of impoverished communities. It has not ensured equitable social justice and has not provided honest alternatives to sustainable development.

Neo-liberal globalisation policies resulted in the restructuring of production; led to economic and resource displacement of local and traditional industries; and increased speculative development projects and loss of socio-economic state support. These contribute to high unemployment amongst poor communities making migration a livelihood necessity for impoverished communities in poor and developing countries.

Forced labour in migration leads to exploitation and further impoverishment of women migrants throughout the stages of migration. This creates unsafe and unfavourable environment for women because it enables human trafficking.

Despite the challenges rural women face, their stories manifest their will to survive and strive for the betterment of their lives and that of their families. The women in these testimonies were placed under difficult situations with little livelihood choices. The stories will be shared across the region and unity will be formed among the most marginalised women through the ARWC platform. They will no longer fight and struggle alone.

Long live Rural Women's Power!

Reclaim Rural Women's Rights!



CARAM Asia, an open and dynamic regional network was set up in 1997 to address special interventions for mobile populations at all stages of migration to reduce their vulnerabilities to HIV and improve migrant workers health outcomes. With over 26 national partners from 16 countries in Asia, CARAM's overall objective is to empower migrants, their families and communities throughout the migration process, build capacities of CBOs/NGOs and carry out evidence based advocacy through Participatory Action Research. CARAM's initiatives ensure to include migrant voices and perspectives on HIV vulnerabilities, migrant health status and recommends potential prescriptions for effective national and regional advocacy.

For more information please visit CARAM Asia at www.caramasia.org

Voices of Rural Women Migrants were compiled in collaboration with:

1. OKUP (Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program) - Bangladesh
2. Burmese Women's Union—Burma
3. Indonesian Trade Union—Indonesia
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5. Tenaganita—Malaysia

Editorial Team:

Valentina Soe—Program Officer, Foreign Domestic Workers

Nova Ceceliana Nelson—Program Officer, Migration Health and Globalisation