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LABOUR: Women Migrants Need Protection, Empowerment

By Prime Sarmiento*



MANILA, Oct 28 (IPS) - Filipino domestic worker Joy Romualdo treasures her Sundays not only because it offers her a respite from a week of hard work, but because she can still remember the time when having a day off was a luxury.

Like many before her from this South-east Asian country, known as the world's largest exporter of labour, Romualdo migrated to affluent Singapore to be a domestic worker so as to provide a better life for her poor parents.

When she arrived in Singapore, nine years ago, she was prepared to work hard, but did not expect that her employer would be so strict as to forbid her from leaving the household even on weekends.

But after a few years, the thirty-something Romualdo found a new employer -- a family of Dutch expatriates -- who gave her better wages and working conditions, including the much-valued day off. "I have more freedom now, I can do anything every Sunday," she said. "My employers don't mind because that's my day off.

Every worker deserves a day off, but not all migrant workers enjoy this right.

There are various United Nations and International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions and instruments that promote and protect migrants' rights, but a good number of the 200 million migrants around the world continue to suffer from problems ranging from illegal recruitment, racial discrimination and physical abuse.

Women, who comprise half of the total migrant population, are especially vulnerable.

Yet, migrant workers contribute to their host societies, through their labour, and to their home communities through remittances. This is why members of civil society from different countries, meeting here ahead of a global conference on migration and development, are pushing government agencies to prioritise migrants' rights and the protection of the rights of women migrant workers.

Issued Tuesday at the end of Civil Society Days of the Second Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), the Joint Civil Society Declaration on Migration, Development and Human Rights called on participating governments -- meeting later this week at the government segment of the forum-- to protect women's rights to decent work, health, security and justice.

"International and national regimes must be adopted to recognise and protect the rights of domestic workers and other informal workers, many of whom are women. They (governments) must also promote the empowerment of migrant women and the achievement of gender equality," the statement said.

"We are worried about the invisibility of the female face of labour. Women are usually employed to take care of our families. But they themselves don't receive the same kind of care in return," Sharan Burrow, conference chair and president of the International Centre for Trade Union Rights, said at the closing of the civil society discussions ahead of the forum.

Complicating matters is the current global financial crisis, which is likely to lead to higher unemployment rates and poverty levels in many countries. The ILO forecasts that the current credit crunch will result in the loss of some 20 million jobs.

Burrow said that it is migrants, especially women, who will bear the brunt of unemployment. Most of them, employed as domestic workers and caregivers, are likely to lose their jobs, go home and "face poverty and unemployment in their own countries".

According to the U.N. Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), most of these women are employed as unskilled workers and are not fully aware of their rights. This makes them vulnerable to physical and social isolation, sexual harassment, and sexual and physical violence.

Often, too, they are employed in industries that are not regulated by the government, making monitoring of rights difficult, according to Nisha Varia, senior researcher of the women's rights division at the New York-based Human Rights Watch.

"Migrant women face extra risk. Most women are in domestic work, agriculture or entertainment. These aren't regulated by the government, so women are more vulnerable to abuse," Varia said in an interview on the sidelines of the conference.

She added that as more and more women leave their home countries for work, it has become increasingly important for governments all over the world to protect the rights of migrant women.

Likewise, beyond ILO and UN conventions, Burrow added that what is needed is "the political will to adopt them". Varia added that many countries are not implementing the obligations that they have under these conventions and standards. "Civil society is calling the governments to ensure that their national laws and practices meet international standards," Varia said.

But rights also entail responsibilities. Charito Basa, a well-known Filipino activist on migrants' rights in Italy, encourages migrant workers to invest in themselves to ensure that they are fully integrated into their host societies -- and more able to watch out for their own rights.

"Integration is a two-way street," she said. She cited the example of Filipino migrant workers in Italy who complain that they cannot find work, but refuse to upgrade their skills and much less learn to speak Italian.

In short, activists say, it is not only states or civil society that must strive to protect migrants' rights, but the migrants themselves.



Financial Meltdown



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This is what Romualdo, the Singapore-based domestic worker, is doing. Two years ago, another Filipino migrant worker referred her to UNIFEM Singapore, which facilitates workshops that seek to empower workers. One of these workshops was on financial literacy and entrepreneurship, which Romualdo attended.

Today, she spends her Sundays volunteering in UNIFEM and planning for a bakery business she plans to set up after she returns to the Philippines for good.

(*This feature was produced by IPS Asia-Pacific under a series on gender and development, with the support of UNIFEM East and South-east Asia Regional Office.)

(END/2008)

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