

Migrant Domestic Workers: Dreams Washed Away by Tears

Everyone longs for security, success, and a promising future. What happens to those with the greatest faith, those who take the biggest risks in order to realise their dreams?

One September morning, Dea watched silently through her family's gate as the rain fell in torrents. While the water washed the dirt and grime from the streets, her younger brothers prepared for school. A faint smile flickered across Dea's face as she remembered her classmates and the good experiences she'd had at school. But those days had come to an abrupt end, just as her recent experience as a domestic worker abroad.

Dea, an 18-year-old Indonesian from Central Java, quit secondary school at an early age so that her parents could educate her younger brothers. Like the estimated 2.5 million Indonesian migrant workers, she yearned for the opportunity to work abroad in order to achieve greater financial security for her family. But this dream became her worst nightmare within months of her arrival to Hong Kong.

After being trained by an agency in Jakarta, Dea was sent to a family in Hong Kong where she was to be paid HK \$2,000 (Rp 2.5 million) per month, or about 10 times what she would make in Indonesia. Work seemed normal at first, but her situation progressively worsened. Dea began her days at 5:30 a.m. to prepare breakfast for the family and lunch for the children. She accompanied the children to school, and returned to her employer's mother's home to cook and clean until 11.00. From there she hurried home to clean before fetching the children at school, from where she returned to cook dinner and clean up afterwards. Most evenings she didn't get to sleep until after midnight. The work seemed endless. It wasn't until much later that she learned the minimum legal wage in Hong Kong was HK \$3,270.

Dea watched the clock constantly because she was made to note down the time upon the completion of each task. Her employer deducted HK \$1 from her salary for each five minutes that was not documented. That's when the abuse started: initially, her employer verbally abused Dea, calling her "dumb" and an "animal." Dea's agent suggested that she "work harder, better, and listen more carefully" when she turned to her for help. Eventually her employer withheld her entire salary, though she forced Dea to sign payment receipts. After two months, the abuse progressed from slapping to beating until one day Dea had no choice but to abandon her dream. Policemen took notice when she had walked numbly into the street, bleeding from injuries sustained to her head and ears.

Dea's story is just one that sheds light upon a growing and urgent problem: 474,310 Indonesian migrant workers went abroad in 2005, an increase of 24% from the previous year. Dea was lucky; she escaped and survived to testify against her employer with the help of NGO workers and Eny Lestari, the President of the Indonesian Workers' Association in Hong Kong. Some migrant workers are not so fortunate.

Most workers experience some form of verbal, physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse on a regular basis and are forced to confinement within the workplace. Contracts are violated, and payments and passports are sometimes withheld by employers or recruiting agents until the last contracted day of work (which make it impossible to flee). The majority of these workers are vulnerable young women with little schooling or knowledge about their rights and the potential dangers of their work situation. Worst of all, most countries exclude domestic workers from labour legislation protection, including Indonesia.

The project, Mobilising Action for the Protection of Domestic Workers from Forced Labour and Trafficking in Southeast Asia, began in September 2006 and will conclude in August 2008. This renewed project will work to reduce domestic migrant worker trafficking and practises in four countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. The main objective of the project is the eradication of forced labour and trafficking of domestic workers in South East Asia through an integrated programme of law, awareness-raising, capacity-building, organisation and targeted direct interventions. The project strategy's key components are aligned with international and national development framework priorities as well as to reduce vulnerability of women migrant workers.

Besides journalism- and researched-based documentation, policy development, and training to increase trade union involvement and government awareness, the project will continue to implement various awareness-raising outreach activities to benefit migrant workers in destination countries as well as in Indonesia. Specific examples from phase one of the project include the production of IEC materials such as posters and pamphlets, a TV documentary production, short film productions for worker training orientation sessions, and an interactive radio program for domestic workers.

By working together, ILO Jakarta and its counterparts collaborate to better the lives of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers—abroad and in Indonesia. Through various approaches and with the hard work of stakeholders, local NGOs, government officials and trade unions, migrant workers like Dea will have the key to a brighter future.

* This story is based on a victim's true account from the book *Dreamseekers: Indonesian Women as Domestic Workers in Asia* by Dewi Anggraeni. Names have been changed in order to protect the identity and privacy of the victim.