

They never Give up

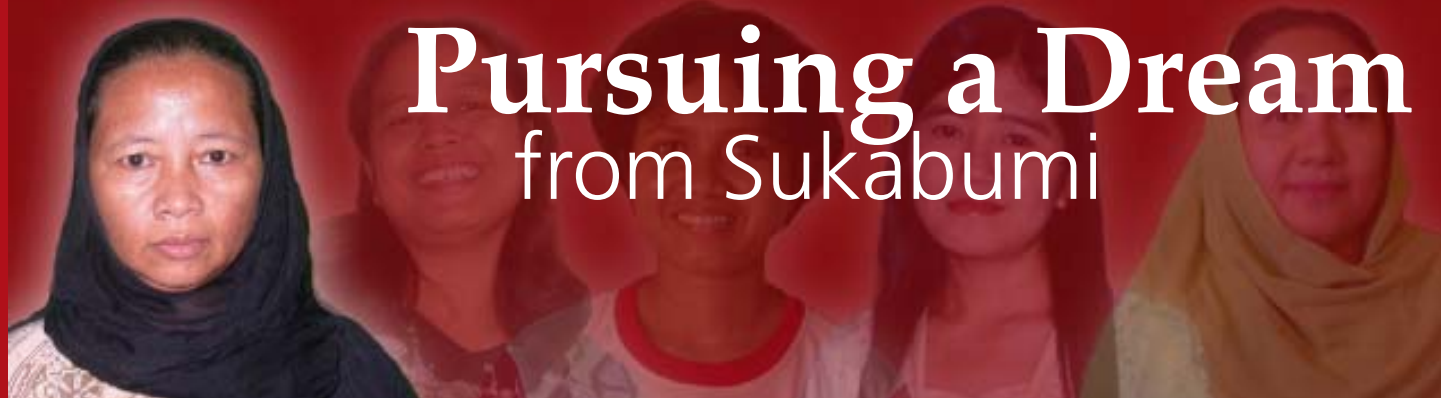


There are many sad stories to be found among the migrant workers who seek their fortunes overseas. Sometimes the reality turns out to be far removed from the dream. Some come home injured and traumatized by rape, others return empty-handed because their employers never paid them or because they were subjected to extortion by officials and scalpers upon their arrival in Indonesia. Some of them come home with HIV/AIDS.

But for them, giving up is not an option. Cursing the darkness will not bring back the light, as the Indonesian saying goes. These are stories of those who refused to stay in the dark. They are the stories not only of migrant workers, but also of those who dedicate their lives to the "foreign exchange heroes". They are shedding some light in the dark.

Rohmat

Pursuing a Dream from Sukabumi



The dark episodes in her life opened her eyes to the need for migrant workers to have comprehensive knowledge on HIV/AIDS.

EVERY time she was knocked down, Rohmat (40) just got up again. She was just doing what she had to do to secure a better life. In a mixture of Indonesian and Sundanese, Rohmat shared some of the bitter experiences she went through in 20 years of working in Saudi Arabia. She was almost raped when she first started working there, and was even jailed for allegedly assaulting her employer the last time she returned there to work.

Hailing from Sukabumi, West Java, Rohmat was only 16 the first time she went overseas to work. The desire to escape poverty forced her to add two years onto her age so that she could get a job as a live-in domestic helper. She was placed in the home of a Saudi Arabian entrepreneur, and tasked with all household chores: cleaning the house, cooking and washing. "From the day I started working there, my employer's eldest son was hitting on me. Almost every night he knocked on my bedroom door and asked me to let him in. I ignored him because I was afraid. But he continued to harass me whenever he got the chance," recalled Rohmat, now a widow with three children.

The dark-complexioned woman escaped a rape attempt, but only by chance. While her employer was out, the son locked Rohmat in the bedroom and tried to rape her. "I was scared to death. Fortunately, my employer came home and I managed to get out of the room," said Rohmat, who was not paid for a whole year.

She asked to be sent home to Indonesia. Her agent turned down her request because she had only served seven months of the two-year working contract she had signed. She had no option but to stay and deal with repeated rape attempts. One day, gripped by fear and panic, Rohmat threatened the employer's son with a kitchen knife.

To make a long story short, she managed to escape by appealing for help to police officers and immigration officials at the airport when she was taken on a trip by her employer's family. Rohmat revealed everything she had gone through. Fortunately, the airport police took her seriously, hid her from the family and managed to get her on flight to Indonesia.

Now a volunteer with an NGO, she realizes how naïve she was the first time she went overseas. Lacking knowledge about what to expect, and knowing nothing about HIV/AIDS and the associated dangers, she expected that everything would be as it was in her dreams.

At the dormitory belonging to the agency that recruited her, that kind of information was only given during monthly sessions, and

the materials were very limited. Regarding HIV/AIDS, potential migrant workers were only told not to "play around" or "do anything stupid", including having unprotected sex with an employer or anyone else.

"Sometimes we were warned, for example, not to run away or to "serve" our employers or anyone else. Because, they said, there were a lot of diseases. They didn't explain what kind of diseases they meant. All we were told was don't come home pregnant, with children, or empty-handed. I think they should have explained about "the diseases". It's better to come back pregnant or with a child than carrying a disease," said Rohmat, who lost all she had worked for so many years to earn when her husband cast her aside to take another wife.

As a volunteer, she tirelessly does the rounds of the migrant worker sending areas in Jakarta and West Java to educate and provide support. The information, according to Rohmat, should be as comprehensive as possible but presented in a way that's easy for the potential migrant workers to understand. ♦

Normawati

Supporting Migrant Workers

Seeing the inhumane treatment of migrant workers broke Normawati's heart and moved her to become an advocate for migrant workers. She focuses on HIV/AIDS issues.

NORMAWATI, a mother of three sons, has many stories to tell about the suffering of Indonesian migrant workers who failed to change their fate by working overseas.

When she first began her career at a telecommunications company, Normawati often had to fly to cities outside Java, especially in Kalimantan. She became very familiar with Soekarno-Hatta International Airport in Cengkareng, Banten. Of course, the telecommunications business was at its peak at that time.

While waiting for her flights, Norma, as she is usually called, frequently saw disturbing scenes. Not just once but several times she saw female migrant workers receiving harsh treatment from a number of officials and middlemen at the airport. "I saw many of them crying because they had lost their luggage and all the money they had earned in years of working overseas. I saw people being deceived, extorted and treated inhumanely by some of the officials

and middlemen milling around there. Six years ago there was no special terminal for migrant workers. They went through Terminal II along with the other passengers. But unfortunately no one wanted to take care of them," Norma remembered.

What's more, one of Norma's relatives fell victim to deception after paying Rp 8 million for administration fees and airfare to a workers recruitment agency who offered her a job in South Korea. The agency owner went missing.

These incidents prompted Norma, who now heads Migrant Workers' Advocacy and Development (PPTKI), to step in. While dealing with her relative's case at the Manpower and Transmigration Ministry, she was surprised to see almost 100 potential migrant workers from various regions also there to seek clarification and justice. She decided to help them. Some of them even stayed at her house for four months while the case was pending. Though they won their case, they only got one-eighth of the money back.

Norma found satisfaction in helping the victims, including her relative, and her success encouraged her to continue to assist migrant workers in trouble. When the company she worked for went bankrupt as a result of the country's prolonged economic crisis, Norma took the opportunity to devote herself to advocating for migrant workers. Since then, she has handled a wide variety of cases ranging from embezzlement and document

forgery to criminal cases such as torture, rape even murder. These were crimes that occurred not only while they were working overseas, but upon their return home as well.

In 2002, said Norma, four migrant workers who had just returned from Saudi Arabia were found dying, their bodies covered in wounds, at Soekarno-Hatta International Airport. At that time, Norma was a volunteer for the Indonesian Migrant Workers Advocacy Consortium (Kopbumi). Without hesitation, she offered her support, and took them to the Sukanto Police Hospital in Kramat Jati, East Jakarta.

Again, she was surprised to find many more women being treated at the hospital after being victims of similar cases. A few of them were suffering from severe depression. Sadly, not one of them had a relative or even a representative from the recruiting agency there to give them support. On the rare occasions when anyone did come, it was always with something else in mind. Rather than taking care of the victims, they just quizzed them about their pay checks. "The treatment they received was sometimes beyond inhumane," said Norma.

Norma's concerns are not groundless. She once assisted a migrant worker from Indramayu, West Java, who was raped by five Arab men. Seriously injured, she was forcibly sent home. Although the case was handled by the National Police headquarters, the outcome is still unclear.



"The government should be responsible for protecting migrant workers. They generate huge revenues for the country in terms of foreign exchange. Moreover, they have helped the government to reduce the unemployment rate caused by the lack of proper job opportunities at home. They sought out opportunities by themselves when the government could not do that for them," Norma added.

An education in HIV/AIDS

After so long dealing with and advocating for migrant workers in trouble, Norma acknowledged that she only started to learn more about HIV/AIDS in 2002 after taking part in a workshop organized by the ILO. Before that, she had never felt the need to explain about HIV to the migrant workers she handled. The sessions on HIV/AIDS issues brought home to her the paramount importance of informing migrant workers and potential migrant workers she worked with about HIV/AIDS.

"It was only then that I realized that the girls (migrant workers) need to know about this. Their purpose for going overseas is to get money, not diseases. We have to prepare them so that they don't come home carrying a disease. Prevention is better than cure," Norma said.

Armed with the knowledge she had gained from several trainings and workshops, Norma decided to do what she could to pass on what she knew about HIV/AIDS to potential migrant workers and their families. At least twice a month she visits migrant worker sending areas such as the Jakarta, Cianjur and Sukabumi regions.

During her visits she also listens to the families' complaints. "Usually, during the education sessions I slip in some basic

information related to HIV/AIDS issues. I deliberately do it like this so that they don't get bored. If I was too serious about it or set aside a certain time to present it formally, they wouldn't be interested. They would just say that it gave them a headache," said Norma, whose expenses are often paid from her own pocket when she makes these visits.

She also talks to the minivan drivers who take the migrant workers from the airport back to their home villages. These drivers are categorized as a risk group for HIV because it is not uncommon for them to have unprotected sex with the migrant workers. "They can't resist the temptation and just check in to a hotel for a couple of hours to have sex," said Norma.

To make her delivery of HIV/AIDS information more effective, Norma uses simple materials presented in clear, easy-to-understand language. She often requests the help of village officials to gather all the residents together to listen.

Initially, said Norma, there is little enthusiasm about discussing HIV/AIDS issues. Eventually, though, they get a little more interested and start to get concerned about the possibility of becoming infected. The husbands left by their migrant worker wives often show the keenest interest in finding out more about HIV/AIDS. The most frequently asked question is whether or not it is safe to satisfy their biological needs with other women who they think are "clean".

"I usually ask them, 'How can you be sure that the women is "clean"? You can't, can you? So just make sure that you're not going to be infecting your wives when they come home.' When I explain it to them in simple terms like that they get the message and ultimately it makes them think twice about having risky sex," said Norma. Indeed, prevention is better than cure. ♦

Telling the story of a friend who died of HIV/AIDS infection is enough to open the eyes of the potential migrant workers she supervises.

EXPERIENCE is the best teacher. The old adage is fully endorsed by Siti Fauziah, an instructor and dormitory head at the overseas workers' training centre (BLKLN) run by PT Anugerah Usaha Jaya (PT AUJ) in Sidoarjo, East Java.

Before working at this migrant worker recruitment agency, Siti spent six years as migrant worker herself: four years in Hong Kong and another two in Malaysia. She also did a two-year stint as a factory worker in Batam.

Her experiences brought her laughter, sadness and a lot of stories. One experience she will never forget is when a friend from her own village in Blitar, East Java—who also worked as migrant worker in Hong Kong—died in 1997 of HIV/AIDS.

According to Siti, not long after it was confirmed that she had AIDS, her friend's employer sent her home to Blitar. As if losing her job wasn't bad enough, thing got worse when she arrived home. She was shunned by her family and her community. And in the last days of her life, she wasn't even allowed to be with her only child, who was taken away by the family in case she became infected.

Outside her house, protests from angry neighbours forced the village administration to ask the police to stand by, fearing the protests would degenerate into something worse.

Siti knew that her friend was dating a migrant worker from Pakistan while she was in Hong Kong. Siti suspects that it was as a result of this relationship "getting too close" that her friend became infected with HIV. Siti added that the culture and the way of

Siti Fauziah

Reflecting on the Experience of others



life in Hong Kong was indeed freer than at home. "I often tell that story to the girls (which is how Siti refers to the potential migrant workers under her supervision) whenever I give them information about HIV/AIDS. I warn them: 'That could happen to you too if you do something stupid. It's your own life you're playing with,'" said Siti.

With warnings like that, Siti hopes she will discourage the potential migrant workers from getting involved in any high-risk behaviour while they are working overseas. At least they will try to resist the temptation, because if they are not careful, they might face the prospect of losing not only their jobs, but their lives.

Apart from having a friend who fell victim to HIV/AIDS, six years' experience of working overseas opened Siti's eyes to the way migrant workers spent their free time, and the type of entertainment centres they frequented. She is well aware of what goes on at such places. While the regulations on migrant workers in Hong Kong have seen some improvement—regular days off are now compulsory, for example—Siti is concerned that migrant workers will just use this time to engage in "negative activities". The more open and permissive culture there only makes it worse, she said.

Migrant workers in Hong Kong, according to Siti, are at risk of getting involved in risky sexual behaviour, be it in lesbian relationships, sex with male migrant workers from other countries or through

using the dildoes that are freely available for sale. The urge to seek some means of escape or release from the pressures they are under is all too real. Most of the migrant workers are in their productive years, dealing with the stresses of a heavy workload, loneliness and homesickness. The difficulty of containing sexual desire, especially for married migrant workers who have had to leave their spouses, is a big issue.

All of these factors are aggravated by the lack of knowledge and the relatively low educational background of the migrant workers, making it even more likely that they will get into trouble. "That's why I feel a responsibility to advise the girls so they don't get caught out. If we had had this sort of training and briefing in my time, my friend might be still alive," Siti added.

Siti has already taken part in two trainings on HIV/AIDS. The first was organized by the Migrant Worker Placement Services Agency (BP2TKI) in 2005, while the second was an ILO workshop in 2006. She has now been entrusted with briefing the migrant workers she supervises. Five of the 13 instructors at PT AUJ have already had HIV/AIDS training. "We take it in turns to brief the girls. We do it in between the other subjects so that they will be mentally prepared while working overseas," Siti said.

The training methodology is varied and emphasises the use of simple language and games to keep the participants interested. "They like it when we ask them to sing or

teach them the songs about HIV/AIDS I learned during my training. And they like playing the games and don't get bored so easily," she said.

Siti deserves kudos. Her experience as a former migrant worker whose friend died of AIDS compelled her to be more concerned and responsible. Information and education, according to Siti, are what the potential migrant workers need to take with them when they go to work overseas. ♦

Vemiana Sidok

A voice of Hope from Larantuka



Information on HIV/AIDS is often delivered in complex and confusing ways. This poses a problem for migrant workers.

SHE describes her experiences and answers questions in a firm, clear voice. She speaks rapidly and fluently, underlining how self-confident she is.

The brisk attitude and obvious intelligence of Vemiana Odilia Sidok, 29, from Larantuka, on the island of Flores in East Nusa Tenggara, shatters people's preconceptions about uneducated migrant workers. "After graduating from high school I decided to work. Initially I wanted to save some money by working at an orphanage and then go to college. But then I thought again. Both my sisters were unemployed after finishing college. Rather than becoming another burden on my family, I asked for my mother's permission to become a migrant worker," Vemiana began her story of life as a migrant worker.

She worked in Singapore for four years. From there, she was able to send money to her family. After coming home, she decided to go overseas again and now is undergoing training at PT Anugerah Usaha Jaya (PT AUJ), a private workers' recruitment agency in Sidoarjo, East Java.

Vemiana is relieved that she is no longer a burden on her parents. What's more, she

is proud that she has been able to get her neighbours to rethink their prejudice against migrant workers. "In the past, the people in my village had a really bad image of migrant work. They thought that once overseas, we were sold or ordered to do all sorts of work. Even once they were back home, migrant workers were still thought of as bad girls because they liked to put on a bit of make-up. But now that I've proved that that's not true, lots of my friends are interested in becoming migrant workers," Vemiana said with a smile.

Working overseas, said Vemiana, is not without risks. There are many problems, from the difficulties of adapting to the different culture and language in the destination country to the more risky and complex problems they sometimes have to deal with.

One of the risks that Vemiana is aware of is migrant workers' vulnerability to HIV/AIDS infection. This is a risk they can face at any time, from before they depart to the time they return home. "When I went to Singapore as a migrant worker I knew only a little about HIV/AIDS. The agency that recruited me then gave no information about it. I only knew about it from the TV. But here (PT AUJ), we are getting some guidance about it," said Vemiana.

She recalled that the clip she saw on TV featured a person with HIV/AIDS who was from a poor family, and found it difficult to get treatment. It showed his life story, the disease and how he had been infected. It opened Vemiana's eyes to HIV/AIDS.

She began to find out more after taking part in the training at PT AUJ. Although there are obviously still some misunderstandings, Vemiana can explain, if asked, about HIV/AIDS. The disease, she asserts, is caused by "germs". If infected, a person could lose their immune system. Some of the signs are fatigue, chronic cough, enlarged pores, frequent vomiting and diarrhoea as well as pus in the urine. "The disease can be transmitted through a mother's breast milk to her child, or through bodily fluids such as blood, semen or vaginal fluids. It can also be transmitted through blood transfusions or organ transplants. To stop the spread of the disease, the government has to campaign and give detailed information to public," Vemiana explained.

She would like to see information disseminated on a much broader scale and backed up with demonstrations and visuals. If it is just given out in the form of lectures or leaflets, a lot of the information is not understood. As an example, Vemiana mentioned the use of condoms as a means of preventing sexually transmissible diseases and HIV/AIDS. "I didn't even know what a condom looked like, let alone how to use one. It would be much better if a demonstration is given along with the information, to make it clearer," she added.

More effective education about HIV/AIDS that reaches as many people as possible would, Vemiana believes, have positive impact on the general public. ♦

Nining Ivana

A candle IN THE DARK

She looks like any other teenager—dyed brunette hair, energetic and flirty. Her slim body is clad in a pair of jeans and long-sleeved pink T-shirt. Her voice is full of life, and the smile never leaves her face as she talks. No one would ever guess that she tested positive for HIV/AIDS two years ago. But this former migrant worker is not about to let it get her down. She's convinced there's always hope.

MY name is Nining Ivana. I am 22 years old. I'm just one of the unfortunate migrant workers who has HIV/AIDS. Migrant workers like me are still second-class residents overseas.

It all started in July 2003. My sister's successful move to Malaysia made me want to follow in her footsteps as a migrant worker. After my final high school exams, before I even received my diploma, I didn't have to think too long before accepting the offer of a job in our neighbouring country.

My reason was simple: I just wanted to save a bit of money and help my parents financially.

I was offered a job at a company that made gloves. Because they urgently needed workers, a workers' recruitment agency arranged all my travel documents in just one week. When my passport and other documents were ready, I left immediately—without any training or health screening—with 36 other potential migrant workers on a Jakarta-Medan bus. It took two nights and three days. From Medan, we took a ferry to Malaysia.

When I left, all I had was dreams. I didn't really know what I was letting myself in for. All of a sudden, after six months of working, I began to get sick. I often had headaches, I had heart palpitations and I lost my balance. I thought I was just homesick and needed more time to adjust. Well, before then I never been away from home.

Luckily, there was a medical centre where I worked. I had a check-up in March 2004. The doctor said I needed a rest and I was allowed two days off work. But I wasn't getting any better. I used to faint a lot. Finally, after being treated for a few days for heavy bleeding from my nose and mouth, I insisted on having a full medical check-up. The tests found nothing suspicious. Everything was fine. Even the result of the HIV test was negative. The doctor only said that there was a slight problem with my heart and gave me some vitamins.

But my condition kept getting worse. At one point I thought I must have mental problems. In the end, I decided to go home since I had spent all my money on the medical treatment. The company only paid the first 10 ringgit and I had to pay the rest. I even had to ask my mother to send me Rp 2 million for the ticket home. I arrived back home in June 2004.

My family's shaky financial situation revived my original intention to earn money. I contacted the workers' recruitment agency that had sent me in the first place. In November 2004, I took the psychometric test for a job in an electronic goods company. Afterwards, I went to place in Tebet, Jakarta, for health screening. I thought this was just a formality because I had had all the tests before in Malaysia.

But like a thunderbolt out of the blue, all my hopes crashed in a second when the agency official told me I was unfit to go. "You cannot go because you have a disease," he said. I took a quick look at the form with my health test data on his desk. Apparently I was suspected of being HIV positive. "What disease?" I asked. The official answered briefly, "Just ask the medical centre." He was unable to give me any explanation.

I went back to the medical centre. They explained that of all the potential migrant workers tested, I was the only one who might be infected with HIV. My jaw dropped. I was stunned. It had never crossed

Nining Ivana



my mind that I might have HIV. What kind of disease was it? All I knew was that it was fatal.

I was referred to Cipto Mangunkusumo Hospital for another consultation. They explained again that I might be infected with HIV. The doctor asked me to go the medical centre again for a repeat test. So four days later I went back to the same clinic and took the same test and got the same result. There was no explanation or counselling about what I should do to prepare myself to face the fact that I was living with HIV. I felt really alone.

I could not think about what lay ahead for me. My mind was blank. I spent my days alone, waiting to die. I didn't tell any of my family. Only my boyfriend knew, because he had also been tested, and the result was negative. I had lost the will to live. I even tried to jump out of a speeding taxi, but my boyfriend stopped me.

I worked at a shopping mall briefly, until my health got worse again three months later. I had diarrhoea, I was coughing up phlegm, and I had a high fever. Two months later I saw the address of an HIV/AIDS organization on TV. I steeled myself for some counselling.

At first, I myself didn't know how or where I got the virus. The NGO activist patiently counselled me, and explained a lot about HIV/AIDS. Then I remembered that when I was in junior high school I used to use injected drugs. I used to share syringes to save money.

I had never realised that HIV could be transmitted that way. I used to think that HIV only affected gays, sex workers or people who slept around. I was wrong. Although I had been sexually active since high school, I had always been faithful to my partner. But I didn't know anything about safe sex.

I was probably infected with HIV long before I left for Malaysia. But because I was still in the window period, I tested negative when I was over there. Now I know I'm not going to die for nothing, because drug therapy and a healthy lifestyle can increase your life expectancy. Once I started having counselling, I started learning all I could about HIV and actively taking part in various training courses until finally I took part in health counselling program.

I'm also more open about myself. In 2006, I declared my status in public. My family only learned about it in 2005 when I went to Dharmas Hospital for the first time for therapy. Luckily they were very supportive, although at first they were afraid that I would pass the virus on to them. My boyfriend also supports me. He's always looking on the internet for the latest information on treatment and therapy, even though we're not a couple any more.

They realized that discrimination could slowly kill me. I thank God that now I'm working as one of three cadres at a community health centre in Cilincing—it's a cooperation between the North Jakarta District AIDS Commission and the Indonesian HIV Prevention and Care Project (IHPCP). Every day I give out information on HIV/AIDS, especially to injecting drug users. The honorarium I get is enough to cover my daily needs.

I don't want others to be infected with HIV like me. I want to show those who are already infected that they can pick themselves back up again, like I did. Every month I get my medication and I do the therapy routinely. For the rest of my life, I'll still try to achieve all my ambitions. Actually I'm lucky to have HIV, because it's pushed me to learn more. Now I am a counselor, giving people information about this issue. If I wasn't doing this, I might have died young with nothing to show for my life.

I still have hopes of going overseas to work. HIV is no different from any other disease and it does not determine whether I'm fit to work or not. I'd like to see more education and training on HIV. When I was in Malaysia, there were Indonesian workers who were sent home for health reasons. But there was never any explanation about what they were suffering from. If a migrant worker was found out to be HIV positive, the employer would blame the recruitment agency or even accuse the worker of tricking them.

There's nothing at all in the way of help or concern from the destination country. They only want healthy workers who are ready to work whenever they are needed. We didn't even have the chance to demand our rights because we had too much to do. Moreover, not one official at the Indonesian embassy gave us any support or even any information about where to seek help and what to do. At that time, I was a documented migrant worker. Can you imagine what it would be like for my friends who had no choice but to go without legal documents?

It's ironic that we are known as the foreign exchange heroes. If that's the case, I just have one simple wish. That everyone, including people living with HIV, has the right to health awareness and health services.

♦