

The Story of Ceriyati: Escaping Abuse in Malaysia

Ceriyati Binti Dapin, a 37-year-old mother of a handicapped son, had no other choice but to become a migrant domestic worker in order to supplement the income of her husband Ridwan, who worked as an ojek driver in the Central Java town of Brebes. Despite the long recruitment process and delays in getting employment in Malaysia, she had a strong desire to help her husband cover her son's regular medical costs.

After undergoing job training to become a migrant domestic worker, managed by the employment agent in Jakarta, Ceriati departed for Kuala Lumpur in 2006. After spending one month waiting for work in a dormitory belonging to her Malaysian agency, she was hired as a migrant domestic worker by a Malaysian family with a working contract stipulating that she would be paid 450 Malaysian ringgit per month. For the first four months, however, she received only 200 ringgit a month due to deductions to cover her recruitment fee.

Problems developed at work as she was frequently assigned administrative office tasks which were not suited to her skills level because her employer's wife was in the business of selling apartments. "My employer's wife was dissatisfied with my work. Due to my frequent mistakes, she regularly slapped, kicked and beat me, including hitting me on the head," she said.

Ceriyati's female employer rarely gave her more than one meal a day with tap water. Accordingly, Ceriyati's weight dropped drastically due to starvation. After working for four and half months, she told the husband of her employer that she wanted to quit her job, but he did not have the courage to discuss it with his wife. As Ceriyati was unable to endure her employer's abuse any longer, she made a plan to escape.

"When my female employer went to church, I took many bed spreads and connected them to make a long rope which I tied to a window of the flat. I climbed down from the 14th to the 11th floor while at the same time screaming for help from residents on the lower floors. The residents then asked some firefighters, who happened to be conducting an emergency drill nearby, to help her get down safely using the extendable ladder of the fire truck," she said.

The firefighters brought Ceriyati to the nearby police station to file a legal complaint about her employer's abuse. The police told her placement agency to bring her to the hospital for medical treatment, but the agency staff warned her not to tell the doctors there that her employer had abused her. Eventually, a couple of Indonesian Embassy officials came to pick her up from the hospital.

In an interview with a labour attache at the Embassy, Ceriyati told him everything about her employer's abuse and about the threat by the Malaysian placement agency. Subsequently she filed a formal legal complaint with the Malaysian police, assisted by the Embassy.

In June 2007, Ceriyati returned to Indonesia with the support of the Indonesian Embassy and underwent medical treatment at the General Hospital in Brebes. With the help of the Indonesian government and Migrant Care, Ceriyati, along with her husband and son, returned to Malaysia at the end of June to answer a summon from the Malaysian police. Till this day, Ceriyati has yet to receive any information from the Malaysian police about the status of the criminal case.

With the help of Migrant Care, Ceriyati eventually received five months salary from her former employer, Rp. 40 million in compensation from the government-appointed insurance company that provides cover for migrant domestic workers, Rp 11.5 million from the Indonesian Embassy and Rp 5 million from the Central Java provincial administration. "While taking care of my handicapped son, I joined Migrant Care because they provide assistance to troubled migrant workers," she said.

Ceriyati's husband Ridwan has barred his wife from going to work overseas again. "My wife and I are happy now with our two children living our daily life on our farmland in our home village. My eldest son, who is 12 years old, is in third class at a special elementary school while my daughter is in second grade at a state elementary school," he said, adding that he really wants to go to Malaysia to retaliate against his wife's former employer. (*)