

The Story of Elli Anita: Resilience in the Face of Adversity

Elli Anita is the third daughter of a family who joined the government-sponsored resettlement program from Jember in East Java to Bandar Lampung, Sumatra, when she was 18 years old. She holds an elementary school level leaving certificate and was expected to work on the family farm. However, after listening to the stories of fellow villagers, she was keen to work overseas as a domestic worker and see other countries.

Elli was sponsored by the recruitment agency PT Karya Manpower Swakarsa in Jakarta. She was certified as baby sitter after undergoing three months of training and was first employed as a migrant domestic worker with a Malaysian family in Kuala Lumpur in 1997, receiving a monthly salary of 500 Malaysian ringgit. "I often had to work ten hours a day and, in general, my employer paid me on time every month. Yet, when I worked less than seven hours a day, my employer was late with the payment," she said.

After two years and two months Elli returned home in 1999. She stayed at home for one month and then departed for Hong Kong to take up a similar job with a family who had a saloon business. Her labor contract stipulated that her monthly salary was HK\$3,670. "In reality, my employer only paid me HK\$2,000 and I was only given one day off a month, although the labor law in Hong Kong stipulates that workers, including housemaids, are entitled to have one day off every week," she said, adding that she learnt about this from the booklet of employment regulations which her employer gave her.

She continued to work for nine months while documenting the employment violations undertaken by her employer. She planned to report the violations to the Indonesian Consulate in Hong Kong, but when she met with Philippine migrant workers, they instead advised her to seek advice and support at Christian Action for Domestic Helpers — a nongovernmental organization which provides assistance to migrant workers. After learning there how to seek a settlement with her employer, she submitted a legal complaint to the relevant Hong Kong authorities.

"I got a full support from cleaning service workers who testified that I was employed as saloon worker and had to work more than ten hours a day. I was then released from my contract and my employer was ordered to pay me HK\$30,000 in compensation," she exclaimed. After winning her case, Elli returned home in 2002.

After a while, Elli decided to work in Hong Kong again through another recruitment agency, attracted by the more attractive employment conditions there. She was employed to take care of an elderly man who was suffering from stress. After working there for six months, however, she could not endure the work pressure any longer and decided to resign, in spite of the objections of her employer and the employment agency. Through mediation by the local labour authorities, Elli received the salary for her final month and got a plane ticket home. Again, she returned to her family home in Bandar Lampung.

Despite these negative work experiences, Elli still wanted to work overseas as a migrant domestic worker. This time, she used the services of a recruitment agency in her home town to go to Bahrain to work for a family of nine. However, it soon became clear that her employer expected her to work excessive hours from very early morning till very late night for the large family. Even worse, the eldest son of the household continuously harassed her sexually. After receiving her salary for the third work month, she decided to leave her employer and looked up information on employment opportunities in the city.

Elli applied for a job in a Starbucks outlet belonging to a German citizen and was hired with a monthly salary of US\$500. While working there as an attendant, she was sued by her former employer who had paid a local agency US\$5,000 to hire her. She won the case after documenting to the Bahrain District Court that she was exploited by her former employer.

"I enjoyed working at Starbucks for two years for a higher salary and I was also given a week-long-holiday to Jordan with a return plane ticket, hotel and pocket money. Unfortunately, while on holiday, my German employer had to return to his home country," she said, adding that she then went back to her family home in Indonesia.

This time, Elli only stayed at home for two months. "I was bored because I was doing nothing while most of my peers were working overseas," she said. Early in 2009, she went to work in Dubai through an agency in Jakarta. She was employed as a secretary in a foreign labor agency in Dubai using falsified documents. She only worked there for three weeks, as her boss tried to rape her several times. She reported the attacks to her agency and they found her new employment as a domestic worker with an Iraqi official in Iraqi Kurdistan.

"My employer introduced himself as Shamal Abdullah and he paid me US\$300 a month. He had a big house with many bodyguards in a town called Selemania. I was aware that I was in war-torn Iraq and I felt very insecure because I heard many bombs go off, as well as shooting by the bodyguards and the Iraqi police."

After working for three months, Elli succeeded in accessing the internet and getting the phone numbers of the Indonesian Embassies in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, as well as of the Indonesian Foreign Ministry. However, before she had a chance to call them, she was hospitalized and underwent surgery for breast

cancer with the hospital expenses covered by her employer.

“During my stay at the district hospital, I had a chance to make calls on my cellular phone to the embassy and the Foreign Ministry to let them know that I was trapped in Iraqi Kurdistan. I spoke many times with a high-ranking official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He said that he was not able to help me in the Iraqi war zone and told me to get out of Kurdistan. However, I realized I was not able to travel anywhere because of the war,” she said.

Elli then filed a complaint with her agency in Dubai, however they insisted that she should honor the labor contract she signed with the agency in Iraqi Kurdistan. After two weeks of intensive medical treatment, she returned to her work place, but on the advice that she should not work too hard. She continued to work for another six months before her agent placed her at a dormitory house where she met many other migrant domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia.

Elli refused to give up and continued to try to find ways to get her and other Indonesian migrant workers out of Iraq. With the help of an international organization, she finally succeeded in organizing transport for herself and her fellow Indonesian migrant workers back to Indonesia. “We were allowed to go back home for humanitarian reasons because we were suffering from various serious medical conditions,” she said.

Along with an Indonesian migrant domestic worker from East Nusa Tenggara, Elli arrived in Indonesia in November 2009. “Upon our arrival at the airport, the Government gave us a red carpet welcome, led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Manpower” she said. During the meeting, she expressed her disappointment to the Government representatives that the Indonesian government had taken no action to rescue the Indonesian migrant workers from the Iraqi war zone.

To this day, Elli is not keen to work overseas again. She is still traumatized by the many hardships and troubles which she encountered during her years of employment as an overseas migrant domestic worker.

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