

Heart Breaking Stories of Child Workers in Domestic Roles

A simple house located at Jalan Sagu Gang Gajen no. 52, Jagakarsa, South Jakarta, is full of the jokes and laughter of the girls living there. They are child domestic workers (CDWs) who are busy in the kitchen. When Media Pembaruan arrived at the house with the LPK Mitra Utama signboard out front, a cozy atmosphere with birds chirping in cages greeted us. LPK Mitra Utama is a recruitment agency, training provider and distributor of babysitters and domestic workers.

"Please, come in," said a long-haired man, inviting a Media Pembaruan representative to have a seat. Soon after, Mashudi, Chairman of the All-Indonesian Association for Training and Placement of Domestic Workers (APPSI), came in with soft drinks. Over a cold beverage, Media Pembaruan had a relaxed conversation with Siti Lestari (17), a CDW.

Siti told us of her sadness and her happiness. "I stay here because I don't want to go back to my boss's house in Ancol. Last Lebaran holiday, I asked permission to go back to my hometown but my boss said if I went home, I could not go again next year. I don't want to work there anymore," she said sadly. Siti went on to tell us that when she was working those six months in Ancol, North Jakarta, she had almost no freedom. "They never allowed me to go out for a walk, even for a little while. My boss said they were worried that I would be hypnotized. I couldn't even chat with the neighbour's domestic workers," said the girl, originally from Lampung, Sumatra.

Similar to other CDWs, her reason for working is poverty. "I want to help my parents. They are farmers. They work other people's farmland. During harvest time, they share the profit," explained Siti, when asked about her family background and her reason to work as a CDW.

Unfortunately, with only a Rp.700.000 salary per month, she cannot give much to her parents. Her monthly salary was not even paid in full every month. "I only received Rp.300.000 for the first month. The Mitra Amanda foundation took the remaining Rp.400.000. They said the cost for of the agency was Rp.200.000 for the mediator and Rp.100.000 for the person who picked me up, and I don't know about the remaining Rp.100.000. They only asked me to sign. The following months, I only received Rp.400.000 and my boss kept the rest. When asked about it, they gave me only Rp.200.000. Only when I wanted to back to my hometown did they give me Rp.400.000," Siti explained.

Khusnul Khotimah, 17, a CDW from Purworerojo, Central Java has a different story. Ima, as she is usually called, worked for her mother's distant cousin. Ima was luckier than Siti, she received a one million rupiah salary per month. "My salary was good. I received monthly pay and daily allowance. Every month, I received Rp. 400.000, and every day I received Rp.20.000 in allowance," she told Media Pembaruan in Kranji, Bekasi.

Similar to Siti, however, Ima seldom received her salary in full every month. "I wish I could have gotten more, but that's what I received. I didn't receive my Rp. 400.000 monthly salary, my boss said I would get it when I needed it. He only gave me Rp. 20.000 per day," said Ima.

She could only take her monthly salary when she wanted to send some money to her parents, but she could not do it every month. Ima could only send money when her employer's relatives came to visit them from their village – Ima and her employer come from the same village in Purworejo.

Like Siti, Ima became a CDW for economic reasons. Poverty forced her to forget about her dreams. "Actually, I wanted to become an elementary school teacher but when I graduated from my junior high school, we didn't have money. My parents are farmers and they don't earn much. So I thought, it's better for me to work and earn money."

Fortunately, Ima did not give up easily. Despite her current job, she is also completing her Package C in the Communal Learning Center (PKBM) in Bekasi. The high cost of university keeps her from continuing her studies past the Communal Learning Center and becoming a teacher, and she tells us, "Actually, I like going to college but it costs money. My earnings do not support further studies so I decided not to think about it," said Ima sadly.

When a sewing training center opened for CDWs near her employer's house, Ima asked permission from her employer to join the course. Her employer supported it so that someday she could start her own business. "My boss said it's better for me to start a business than to be a teacher. If I have some money, I'd rather open a business. Then I found out that there was an ILO training, so I joined the course here. Someday, I would like to open my own boutique," she said shyly. The sewing course she joined was a collaboration between the instructor, Mrs. Napsiah, the Mitra ImaDei Foundation, and the ILO.

Mashudi, Chairman of APPSI, said poverty, which is still a serious issue in Indonesia, will lead to more CDWs like Siti and Ima in the future. He told Media Pembaruan that the 15-18 year old domestic worker phenomena will be difficult to eliminate. According to Mashudi, recruitment of CDWs still has high economic potential. "The economic potential of CDWs is 30 per cent, which is high," he said.

In addition, he added, poverty is a major problem that forces many girls to work as CDWs instead of continuing their studies into senior high school. "If they are asked to go back to school, who would pay for that? We know it is categorized as a WFCL. That's why we place them with recognized service users, as we know what kind of job they will do. Children 15 to 18 years old should not be allowed to babysit or cook. They should only clean the house and wash clothes. We explain the job criteria to users," he said, resting back in his chair.

Furthermore, he said, we have ambiguous laws. "It is difficult for us to refer to the law. Are domestic workers governed in Labour Law No. 13 of 2003? If so, then we should refer to it, but agencies (labour suppliers) follow articles of the law selectively. For example, they follow the article on age, but do not use other articles as references to better understand what is allowed. The ILO Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age for Admission to Work, which has been ratified into Law No. 20 of 1999, clearly states that the minimum age for work is 15 years old. The law is very clear. Labour Law No.13 of 2003 states that 15 to 18 year old children are allowed to work, but Law No. 23 of 2002 on Child Protection says children are those who are under 18 years old. So the laws are overlapping," he said in confusion.

As a solution, Mashudi and other suppliers of DWs under APPSI issued a special policy concerning CDWs. "First, we usually place them in households known to us. Second, they must have a clear job description. Children of 15 to 18 years old are not allowed to babysit or cook, so they only clean the house and wash clothes. We explain the criteria to users. Our reason is because babysitting is very risky; they are still young so we don't want to take the risk. In terms of cooking, they are not good at it yet anyway so users would not get any advantage out of them."

The time has come for the government and the House of Representatives to pass laws on domestic workers to provide legal protection for DWs and CDWs.

This article is the first article on child domestic workers in Jakarta from a series of three in-depth articles written by Adhitya Himawan of Media Pembaruan Magazine on November 2012. The article is part of the ILO's media fellowship programme on child labour and education, jointly conducted in collaboration with the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) Jakarta and six selected leading, national mass media. The media fellowship programme was part of the campaign conducted by the ILO through its Combating Child Labour through Education Project, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.