

Employer's Slight Hope for Child Domestic Workers

Issues pertaining to children domestic workers (CDWs) are rarely made public. It is different than factory workers who are frequently highlighted by mass media when they have public demonstrations. Reports on CDWs are rare, almost nonexistent.

In Indonesia, girls usually start working as CDWs at 12 years old. The minimum age required to work, however, is 15 years old. They are recruited by future employers, friends, relatives or labour suppliers from remote or poor regions to work in big cities. The users prefer to hire children because they are cheaper than the adults, and easier to control. They rely on their employers and cannot escape.

Mashudi, Chairman of the Indonesian Association for Training and Placement of Domestic Workers (APPSI), confirmed this to be true. "The reason for the selection of children is because these CDWs hardly know Jakarta, so they are easier to control. Their salaries are lower than an adult salary although not by much, perhaps by only Rp.100.000 to 200.000. There used to be a big difference, but now the demand for CDWs is not as high as before," Mashudi told Media Pembaruan in LPK Mitra Utama's office.

He said lately, the demand has shifted to experienced DWs. "People used to look for cheap DWs. But now, the salaries for CDWs and experienced DWs are almost the same. The salary of a CDW is now up to Rp.800.000, while that of an experienced DW is Rp.900.000 to one million. We increased it to encourage people to hire adult DWs," he added.

Maria Yohanista Djou, the Head of the Mitra ImaDei secretariat, has a different opinion. Maria believes that girls have a tendency to prefer work in factories than as CDWs. "I doubt if we have more CDWs now that we used to. We went to a location where we were told there were many CDWs, but it was difficult to find one. We have to evaluate our data. We visited many areas, but the workers we met were all at least 18 years old. Many young girls refused to work as DWs, preferring instead to work in factories. Sometimes they will work as CDWs temporarily, as a stepping stone. Once they have a chance to work in a factory, they will move," Maria told Media Pembaruan in Jakarta.

If Mashudi and Maria's opinions are true, this would represent a positive step as DWs in Indonesia have historically not been considered workers. As a result, they are not protected by national labour laws which guarantee workers' basic rights to a minimum wage, overtime money, permissible maximum working hours and social security, among other benefits. Therefore, DWs are in a very weak position. According to ILO data, there are 2,6 million DWs in Indonesia and at least 688.132 of them are girls under 18, or CDWs.

Fortunately, some employers are willing to help develop the skills of their CDWs. Media Pembaruan met some of them in the Sanggar Belajar Masa Depan PRTA in Kranji on a Sunday in September. Some employers even brought their CDWs to the sewing courses themselves. One of them is Lina Marlina, 38; she works for a shirt printing factory in Bekasi and takes her domestic worker, Rosita, 18, to the studio to learn how to sew.

"I brought Rosita here yesterday because I only found out about this recently," Lina told Media Pembaruan shyly. She hopes that by joining this course, Rosita can someday start her own business. "I don't want her to be DW forever. That's why I encourage her to move forward. If I didn't bring her, she wouldn't have known about this opportunity. She has only graduated from elementary school so hopefully someday, when her sewing business is up and running, she can use her money to pay for more studies," she said.

Lina admitted that her concern for Rosita is likely because they are related. "We are related. She is my cousin's daughter. She has lived with me since 2001 because her family's house is in a remote area in Tangerang," she explained.

Siti Wahyono, 68, expressed similar hopes. The retired civil servant from the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration took her CDW to the course so that she could develop skills and move forward. "I found out about it when I was applying for an early childhood education (PAUD) in the village office. Mrs. Napsiah approached me and gave me a brochure on sewing training for child domestic workers. I thought it sounded like a good program so I took my CDW, Hayati, and Suheti, my neighbour's CDW to participate. I told my neighbour that these children shouldn't work as DWs forever. They will get married someday and they should have something else to do for a living. After all, the course is free," she said enthusiastically.

Due to weak protection from the state for CDWs, their employers' care and attention is crucial. CDWs tend to have a low self-esteem, therefore their employers' motivation will help them to gain the confidence they need to learn and develop. "There is a strong impression that these children have a low self-esteem. During the first meeting, it is often very difficult to ask them questions, or encourage them to follow the process. They are quiet, shy and lack confidence, even among their friends. They can not express their feelings because they are used to being quiet, and told what to do. They always put themselves below other children," said Maria.

However, we cannot depend on employers' kindness to resolve the CDW issues. There needs to be a strong legal framework protecting domestic workers, including CDWs. This is why a law on domestic workers is very important. Maria recounted the details of a meeting on this topic that she attended with Commission XI of the House of Representatives to discuss and draft a law on domestic workers. She suggested a regulation implementing a five year transition period to stop the recruitment of CDWs. "If they are already working, then so be it because if we return them to their families, their families wouldn't support them. In the discussion, there was a suggestion to prolong the transition period to 20 years, and to delay implementation. That is unreasonable. There has to be a transition period starting instantly. But with that, there is still a possibility that new children will be recruited. After the transition period elapses, there should not be any recruitment of CDWs."

So what are you waiting for, Representatives? Please pass the DW bill!

This article is the third and final 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.