

Brave Women

The Story of Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong



Presented by
Asian Migrant Center (AMC)
The Hong Kong Coalition of Indonesian Migrant Workers Organization (KOTKIHO)

Supported by

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Those Who Continue to Fight for Their Rights





Introduction

For many years Hong Kong has been a primary destination for Indonesian migrant domestic workers. Historically dominated by Philipinas, Indonesian women now make up nearly half of all migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, with over 100,000 now living and working in Hong Kong.

Migrant domestic workers are ubiquitous in Hong Kong, there is not an area or neighborhood in Hong Kong without them. They are not only house cleaners and cooks, in many cases they are the primary care-givers of the children and elderly. The contribution of domestic workers to Hong Kong can not be understated, it is they who perform the traditional 'women's work' freeing Hong Kong women to enter the formal workforce contributing further to Hong Kong's productivity.

Indonesia has become the second largest exporter of migrant workers in Southeast Asia after the Philippines. According to the World Bank, Indonesian migrant workers remittances now amount to more than USD 6.1 billion annually. For many of Indonesia's provinces, the remittances sent by migrant workers are their primary source on income.

In 2007, 696,746 documented Indonesian migrant workers went overseas for work, an increase of 47% over the past two years and almost 100% over the past 10 years. In spite of the central role of migrant domestic workers in sustaining the national economy of Indonesia and supporting the economies of destination countries; migrant workers problems and their need for adequate legal and administrative protection in Indonesia and in all destination countries including Hong Kong has not yet been effectively addressed by Governments and policy makers.

This book contains the stories of Indonesian women, who went to Hong Kong to work as domestic workers. These stories are not meant to be a representation of the experiences of all Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, but are presented here to allow them, in their own words, to tell you about the very difficult problems they face to do no more than provide a living for their families.

These stories are true. They were told to us by the workers themselves. They show you how few real protections there are for migrant domestic workers. How easy it is to become a victim of unscrupulous agents and employers. How all of the burden and all of the costs, always fall on the workers.

The Asian Migrant Center would like to thank all of the workers featured in the book for not only giving us their stories, their time, but also their hearts. To them and to all migrant domestic workers this book is dedicated. We would like to thank KOTKIHO, IMWU, Ms. Nurul Qoiriah, Ms. Franciska Ria Susanti, Ms. Mega Vistrian, Mr. Fanani, and Mr. John Lindsay for their work in putting this book together. We would also like to thank the ILO Jakarta and OXFAM HK for supporting this effort, also special thanks for Cristian Action DMW program for allowing us to use one of the poster that was created by women domestic workers in HK during the "poster making competition"

As the number of women going abroad to work as domestic workers continues to grow, we hope that in some small way, informing the public about the harsh realities of migrant domestic work will contribute to change and a future where all workers are treated fairly, equally and with dignity.





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1. Never Lucky

SHE was fidgeting as her friend talked cheerfully on a mobile phone beside her. The merry voices she heard could not infect her unhappiness. With some doubt, she asked her friend who had just turned the phone off:

“Who just called?”

“My husband,” said her friend swiftly.

Tears dropped slowly from her eyes. She ran into her room, weeping her heart out. She left her friend sitting there, phone in hand, confused.

Suhartatik is her name. She was born in the small village of South Blitar in eastern Java. She is the younger of two daughters in her family. Like her older sister, Suhartatik (whose nickname is Hartatik), has only graduated from SMP (junior high school, ninth grade). Not because she did not want a higher education, but because her parents, who are only peasants, did not have enough money to support her education.

Her sister decided to get married after she had worked for four years in Surabaya. Hartatik followed in her sister’s footsteps. Not by looking for a job, but by getting married. Hartatik married her former, older, school-mate, just a month after she graduated from junior high school. She had been forced to marry him, even though they were only teenagers, because an embryo lived in her womb. She didn’t want to be a single parent.

A month after their wedding, her husband – Eko Yulianto – asked her to permit him to go to Malaysia. He hoped to earn money for his new family. However, to get a job abroad, Eko asked for a lot of money from Hartatik’s parents. It created sourness in Hartatik’s relationship with her parents. Nevertheless, Eko insisted on going to Malaysia.

Seven months after her husband’s departure for Malaysia, Hartatik gave birth to a baby. She named her Natasya. Hartatik was eager to tell Eko about their newborn, but she didn’t know where the good news had to be sent. Eko never wrote her any letters since he had departed for Malaysia.

Hartatik couldn’t remember when her new daughter Natasya for the first time met her father. But

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she recalled the news of thousands Indonesian migrant workers being deported from Malaysia. Among them was her husband.

Her husband came home without money. There were no earnings that he brought home, despite this Hartatik still welcomed him. She also did not get angry when four months later her husband decided to go to Malaysia again. He promised her the same things, that he wanted to make her and their daughter happy.

Nevertheless, he experienced the same sad episode as once before. After one year in Malaysia, Eko was deported along with other Indonesian migrant workers. He once again came home empty handed.

Having no money and being jobless, they chose to stay in Eko parent's house. They took Natasya with them. Fortunately, the house was not far from the village where Hartatik's childhood house stood and Hartatik could also see her parents who had been ailing.

Life kept going on as usual until not long after Eko's homecoming when a 27 year old woman visited their house. Eko was in a deep sleep in his bedroom as this woman came and saw Hartatik.

The woman told Hartatik that Eko had caused her to become pregnant. This news struck Hartatik with a tremendous blow. She was angry and embarrassed. The woman demanded that Eko assume responsibility for it.

Hartatik showed a lack of restraint, she told the unexpected guest about her daughter Natasya and her status as Eko's wife. The woman was subdued, but she ran into the bedroom where Natasya slept. She tried to choke Natasya while she spoke rude words. Her sudden insane act made Hartatik angry. Hartatik took a thermos full of hot water from kitchen, and then she tried to pour the hot water on the woman. But Eko had woken up and separated the women.

That day Hartatik tried to get a divorce. Eko said no words. He did not deny it and he accepted the situation. He complicated the divorce process by questioning the guardianship issue. He wanted to take care of Natasya, to have her in his guardianship, but Hartatik fought this. Hartatik brought Natasya to her parent's house. She began to look for a job while she waited for a divorce decree from the court.

With the 500,000 rupiah that Hartatik borrowed from her father, she registered with an employment agency in Surabaya for domestic workers and baby sitters. After a week of staying in the agency's center, she went to Jakarta to start her first job. She worked as a baby sitter in the Indonesian capital. With her earnings of 400,000 rupiah a month, she could buy milk for Natasya. However, she could only work there for four months. Her employer was bankrupt and could not pay her any more. She was fired, despite this she still had to pay her agency an extra fee of 400,000 rupiah.

Nevertheless Hartatik was not discouraged. She looked for another agency to get a job. The next agency required a month of her potential salary as their fee and Hartatik got a job as baby sitter in the city of Denpasar. Like in Jakarta, she earned 400,000 rupiah per month. Unfortunately, she could not stay in this job. Her employer judged Hartatik as incompetent, fired her and then returned her to the agency.

When the agency asked her to go back to Jakarta, she declined. She wanted to work in Surabaya, so that she could see her daughter if she missed her. Fortunately, a rich family in an elite area of Surabaya

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needed a baby sitter. Hartatik got the job and worked there for 2 years and six months. During that time her wages gradually rose, from 400,000 rupiah per month at the beginning to one million rupiah per month by the time she finished working there.

She actually wished to work longer for the family, but her parents didn't give her permission. They feared that Eko would win guardianship over her daughter Natasya. They wanted to continue to take care of their grandchild. Hartatik followed her parent's wishes. She went back to her parents' house to insure they kept custody of Natasya.

Unfortunately, she couldn't stay in her parent's house for a long time. She knew her life would be difficult if she couldn't find a job. Her parents had born the cost of her divorce proceedings. When the court finally issued the divorce decree and gave the guardianship authority to Hartatik, her parents were much in debt from the process.

She didn't have the heart to see her parents tied to a heavy debt. After getting the divorce decree, two months after her homecoming from Surabaya, she decided to look for a job. This time she wanted to get a job in foreign land.

She was influenced by her friend who had just returned from Hong Kong. Her friend told her that it is easy to work in Hong Kong and that she could bring back a lot of money. Her friend convinced her that if she registered to a PT (Indonesian migrant workers often call a recruitment agency a PT), she can also get a good wage.

The potential high wage convinced her. After all, seeing the poor economic situation of her parents had broken her down. Without any delay, she went to the employment agency at once for help getting a job. She stayed at their training center for six months. Despite her long stay she didn't receive any training at the employment agency as is required by law. She didn't get the Cantonese courses that are required and that she needed to perform her future job in Hong Kong. The agency only promised that eventually she would fly to Hong Kong.

However, the promise still had not been realized after six months of staying there. Becoming impatient with this waiting, her parents asked her to come back home. She listened to her parents and went back. Then, a week later, the agency told her that her visa to Hong Kong had been issued, and it asked her to return to the agency. She returned but in fact had to wait for another month at the agency's training center before she actually went off to Hong Kong.

Living in Hong Kong started a new episode in Hartatik's life. The main theme of this new episode was not different from her experience in Indonesia; it was only another sad chapter in her life. Arriving in Hong Kong on the 7th of December 2005, she didn't go to a new employer at once. The agency said the employer would hire her next month. The agency asked her to do a provisional job at another employer for 'skills training'. They called it PKL, job training.

"The agency promised that I would receive payment during the PKL period," she said. But the promise was never realized. She never received one dollar during the time she worked there.

When her real employer came to the agency to pick her up, she had to break the glass and escape through the window of her "PKL" employer's house. She was forced to run away because the PKL

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employer wouldn't let her leave.

On the 26th of January 2006, she moved to the house of the new employer who signed a contract with her. She remembers that the couple were kind people. They never abused her or did other bad things to her. She enjoyed the "luxury" of eating three-times a day. She was happy there, even though she only earned HK\$ 1,800 a month. In her contract and in the receipts she signed they stated that her wage was HK\$ 3,320 per month. In addition to this, her first five-month's wages had been deducted by the agency and she had to hand over all of her first five month's wages to the agency. The agency just said it was for the recruitment fees.

She didn't resist the unjust arrangement. She didn't resist when she learned that the employer wouldn't give her a day off each week, which was legally her right under Hong Kong law. They said they would only begin to give her days off after she worked there for five months. In reality she only ever got a day off twice a month.

Unfortunately, their kindly attitude began to fade starting the second month she worked there. Of course they didn't abuse her, but they stopped giving her food three times a day. They only let her eat once a day, so she often suffered from hunger. She sometimes would eat the leftover food her employers didn't finish because she couldn't stand being so hungry.

When she eventually began to be paid and had her own money, after she paid all of her first five months salary to the employment agency for recruitment 'fees', she often had to spend her own money to buy food because her employer didn't give her enough. Incredibly she even sometimes had to pay her employer with her money to compensate for the cost of the food she prepared that was deemed not delicious by the employer.

In April 2006, the employers began to show even clearer that they had a bad attitude. It happened as she accidentally hit her employer's arm with a hot frying pan she was using. He was so angry. He thought she had intentionally done it. Suddenly he grabbed her hand and put it in a boiling rice cooker. She tried to break away, but his grip was too strong.

Tears dropped from her eyes since she couldn't stand the pain of the boiling rice any longer. But her employer just told her to stop weeping. He said he would unilaterally fire her unless she stopped crying. Fearing the loss of her job, she held her back her tears.

In fact, this was only the beginning. Over the next months, she received more and various forms of abuse. For example she was forced to kneel before the male employer because she accidentally tore his shirt.

One midnight, her female employer told her to stand and stretch her arms. Her employer then had her hang the children's just washed shoes from her arms and stand there. The employer wanted the shoes dried off that night because her children will wear them in the morning.

No matter how hard she worked it was never enough. They even began to hit Hartatik's head against the wall whenever they deemed the food she cooked not good enough. One day, their banging her head in to the wall caused her to pass-out.

They were in a panic and took her to the agency. Then the agency brought Hartatik to a hospital. At the hospital, they told the doctor that she had fainted from hunger. They also instructed her to give similar answers when doctor asks her. She obeyed. For three days she had to stay in the hospital.

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As soon as she was discharged from the hospital, she was taken back to their home and told to work by her employer. When she said she had a headache, they told her to drink gravy made from pig's intestines. They said it would heal her, but in fact it caused her to vomit.

They also instructed her to work at their friends home whenever they went to other cities, for up to three days. From morning to afternoon, she cleaned their friend's home. At night she returned and still had to clean her employer's home. When she took a wage of HK\$ 100 for the three days of work from the friend, her employers were furious and seized the money. They said she had embarrassed them since she took money from their friend.

One day they threatened that they would throw her from the 32nd floor of the building, where the apartment was, because they decided that she took too long to serve a cup of tea. "He grabbed my right hand, while his wife gripped my left one. They had opened the window and said that they would throw me out of it."

They told her to jump, but she refused. They continued to try and force her to jump, but she stuck it out and refused. She was bruised on her arm since they kept pulling it while trying to force her to jump.

Since she couldn't bear the abuse any longer, she decided to run away from the house.

Running away from the employer's apartment didn't end her problems. Since she had received so few days off she almost didn't have any friends in Hong Kong. She hardly had had the chance to go around Hong Kong and she didn't know the city well.

When she ran away the only place she knew to go, to get away, was the subway. Unfortunately, her employer discovered her when she went in to the station. He grabbed her and they became locked in a bitter fight. Suddenly, he choked her. She struggled to push him away, and then finally freeing herself she ran in to the train.

In the train, she wept her heart out and an Indonesian migrant worker approached and offered her help.

Hartatik told her about her problems. The new friend gave her the address of a Wanchai based agency. She recommended that Hartatik must not return to her old agency because it will send her back to the employer. She convinced her to go to the Wanchai agency which will help her.

Following her suggestion, Hartatik went to this Wanchai agency. She hoped she could get a place to stay for one or two days in the agency's boarding house.

The friendly welcome at the Wanchai agency pleased her. Furthermore the agency introduced her to a Malaysian man who promised to bring forward a legal suit against her employer. He said he will submit the case to Hong Kong Labor Department. He also said the employer had violated the minimum wage law as they paid her only HK\$ 1,800 per month which was under the current minimum wage of HK\$ 3,200 a month.

However, he also demanded several requirements for his assistance. He required as his fee 30 percent of the total claims when they won the case.

That was not the only cost she had to bear. She was also required to hand over 70 percent of the claims to the Wanchai agency for paying for its boarding house, food, visa, and the interest on all costs.



That meant Hartatik would not get any money if she won the claim of HK\$ 22,000 for unpaid wages against her employer. "They asked me to pay HK\$ 45 a day for the boarding house fee. They said it will have interest added to it if I can not pay it for a month. That's not including food. I had also been asked to pay a visa arrangement fee amounting to HK\$ 500, though the real fee is only HK\$ 160. They said the extra fee is for the interest on my debt," she said.

Since the process of her suit took a long time, the agency felt they were losing money. They then drove her away from their boarding house, and they didn't give her a single dollar even though during the two months she stayed there she had performed domestic work for them.

With no money and no family, she was forced to sleep under a permanent tent in Victoria Park, Causeway Bay. She could get food from a few of the migrant workers who had been taking a holiday in the area. Unfortunately she couldn't stand the blowing cold wind at night because the tent had only canvas above her, nothing on the sides.

Then she met a migrant worker who had been staying in the boarding house of a migrant worker's organization. The worker brought her to the boarding house. She could stay there without any cost. Still, she could not break with the Malaysian who submitted her case to the court. "All my documents were in his hands," she said.

For a case such as Hartatik's, the person submitting the suit can not have a representative do it for them, they have to do it themselves. However, workers are usually too afraid of the system to submit their cases by themselves so they need someone to accompany and help them submit their case. The Malaysian lawsuit-broker "helping" Hartatik had so far only been accompanying her when she met the defendant or the Hong Kong Labor Department.

Nonprofit organizations, such as Helpers for Domestic Helpers and Christian Action's Migrant Workers Program, provide free of charge consultations for migrant workers about how to submit lawsuits. Unfortunately only some migrant workers know of the existence of such organizations.

Hartatik was finally brave enough to free herself from the lawsuit-broker when the Labor Department agreed to half of her claims, and she took home HK\$ 11,000 (around 12 million rupiah).

By bringing a friend with her to help, support and accompanied her, she was able to receive the money without the lawsuit-broker who wanted to take it from her.

She sent all of the money to her home village Kesamben, South Blitar, where her parents and her five-year old daughter lived. "My parents were in debt for paying the cost of the guardianship lawsuit with my husband. I hope this money can pay off their debt," she said.



2. Sadness Scavenger

SHE has short hair, a sweet smile and the way she speaks reveals that she is still just a teenager. She is just 17 years old. She is Dewi Ita Purnamawati, just call her Dewi.

She went to Hong Kong after being homeless for two years in Surabaya. She was even jailed for two months for selling marijuana to an undercover policeman.

"I was only a courier who had to hand over a packet. I didn't know there was marijuana in it," she said.

Dewi never finished high school. She had only studied in Madrasah Aliyah Negeri – an Islamic high school – for two months. After that, she went to Pasuruan to look for a job.

She took pity on her grandfather and grandmother who had cared for her since she was a newborn baby. Her parents had left her and her twin sister, Dewa Ardita, soon after they were born.

By her grandmother's accounts, their parents had been forced to leave them, because they weren't able to assume the burden of supporting the family economically. Her parents went to Sumatra, leaving Dewi and Dewa in their village of Bulu Agung, in the District of Pesanggrahan, Banyuwangi, with their grandfather and grandmother.

Dozens of years later, Dewi finally met her parents in the city of Lampung after having to follow a winding, twisted road of information to find them.

Dewi remembered that she had been separated from her sister while they were still in the second grade of elementary school. Her uncle, an older brother of her father, took her sister to his home in Banyuwangi. Starting then, it would be many years before she saw her sister again.

Several years later, she heard that her sister had worked as domestic worker in Hong Kong. This news encouraged her to go to Hong Kong. Unfortunately, she had a bitter experience when, after trying

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to contact her sister Dewa, her sister didn't want to admit that she was her sister.

"She refused to see me. She scolded me when I phoned her. Then she changed her phone number so I couldn't call her anymore," she recalled.

Her sister, she said, for all this time had been carrying malice toward her parents who "dumped" them. When Dewi finally met her parents in Lampung and tried to rebuild their interrupted daughter-parent relationship, her sister still refused. She even accused Dewi and their parents of trying to get her money.

"She even snapped at Dad when he called her. She looked down on us, like we were beggars," she remembered.

After that, Dewi didn't want to try to meet her sister again. She was determined to survive in Hong Kong without any help from her sister. The only memory of her kindly sister is of her eight-year old face when her uncle took her away with him.

Her journey to Hong Kong became a series of heartbreaking stories. After she ran away from her grandfather's home, she worked as domestic worker for a rich family in the city of Pasuruan. Her employer was an Arabian man. She hoped she could earn good wages by doing the job there. However, she could only stand working there for four days as her employer tried to rape her.

Instead of returning to her grandfather's home, she left Pasuruan and went to Surabaya. In Surabaya, she joined the street children's community since she didn't have money to live anywhere. She did anything to survive, from selling newspapers to polishing shoes. At nights, she slept below a highway fly-over or on the stoop of stores along with other street children.

And then that bad day arrived when a man promised to give her a lot of money if she wanted to deliver a packet to someone. She wasn't aware at all that the packet was marijuana. Worse, the man who received the packet was an undercover policeman. Due to this reckless decision, she was detained for two months.

After leaving the prison, she didn't know where she could go. Next she stayed in a shelter for street children in Surabaya. Here she met a man from Ponorogo who told her that she could look for job abroad. She agreed at once.

She registered with Intracaraka, an employment agency for migrant workers, in Surabaya. A month after staying in the agency's shelter, she still had a guilty conscience from running away from her grandfather's home. She called him, telling him that she wanted to work in Singapore. He couldn't stop her because she had already registered with the agency and had been living in agency's shelter.

In 2003, she finally arrived in Singapore. There she earned S\$ 200 per month. She remembered that her employer was a kind person. He even convinced her to stay there when she wished to go home following the end of her first employment contract.

In Singapore, one year later, she heard from her old neighbor who also worked in Singapore that her grandpa and grandma had passed away. She was depressed. She was aware that she might not be able to go home because under the job contract she had to work for one more year. She knew that she didn't have a place to return to now.

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Fortunately, she met her cousin who had also been working in Singapore. The cousin informed her of where her parents lived in Lampung. She also learned that her mother bore three more children while they lived in Lampung. She was grateful to the cousin for helping her to phone her parents.

When her employment contract expired in 2005, she decided to go to Lampung, to see her parents for the first time since she was born. She recalled being moved to tears as they met two days ahead of the Id holiday.

She said she has never hated them though they had “abandoned” her. She even felt happy to see them again.

However, she only stayed in Lampung for two months. She asked her parent’s for permission to work abroad again.

At first, they tried to stop her. They were afraid she would have the same bad experiences of other migrant workers whose stories are often reported by the newspapers. But she had firmly set her mind on looking for a job in another country, and they finally permitted her to go.

Actually, she was determined to work in a foreign land since she wanted to lift the economic burden off of her parents.

She got information about Hong Kong from her neighbor named Muslim who had been a “sponsor” or broker for women who want to get a domestic worker job abroad. She went to Jakarta along with him to start the process for working abroad. Together they crossed from Bakahuni to Merak on a ferry.

She was not worrying at first as he had told her there would be four other women who will be traveling with them to Jakarta. But when the ferry left the east coast of Sumatra Island, she began to become nervous as she realized the four women were only his lies. So, she went to Jakarta with only with this 40 year old man.

Of course, there were no bad things that happened during their crossing on the ferry. However their good journey ended when they arrived in at Merak’s port. In the city he brought her to a motel. He argued that it was already too late at night to bring her to the office of the employment agency in Jati Bening, West Bekasi. She didn’t mind that she had to sleep at the motel, but she anticipated that in all likelihood bad things were going to happen.

And that was true. That night, he tried to rape her. “He booked only one room with two beds. He said he did not have enough money to book two rooms. There he tried to rape me,” she said.

Of course, she resisted him. She cried out loudly and then ran out of the room. He feared that her crying would invite an investigation, so he aborted his indecent act. He was not able to do anything as she locked the door and left him inside the room. “During the night I slept outside, just in front of the door,” she said.

The following morning he, in a deep silence, saw her off to the employment agency, Ar Mira, in Jati Bening. After he took the fee from the agency, he left her there.

She stayed at the agency’s shelter for two months until she went to Hong Kong on the 8th of June, 2006. A day after she arrived at the office of the Hong Kong employment agency in Causeway Bay, she was brought to her new employer in Tai Wo.

In that 27th floor flat, she had to sleep in the living room because it had only two rooms. One was

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a bedroom for the employer and her husband, the other room was for their three sons, all in their 20s.

At first, she didn't know what job her employers did. She only knew that the male employer always left the flat early in the morning, wearing a uniform with a "security" label. Meanwhile his wife always left at dawn, bringing with her a big black bag and wearing a wide-brim hat. All their sons just stayed at home, commenting on whatever she did.

However, she didn't care about their commentaries since she was glad that she signed a contract stating that she will earn HK\$ 3,320 per month. However, her wages were deducted by HK\$ 3,000 per month, for the first seven months, to pay the recruitment fee to the agency.

Then one day she found out that the employers didn't only employ her to clean their flat, but also to force her to become a scavenger.

The secret profession of her female employer was uncovered when her employer brought her along one morning to the beach. She asked her to wear a similar "costume" and to bring some tools; the tools were a wide-brim hat for protecting her from sunburn, a big black plastic bag that she carried on her shoulder, and a stick for picking up waste.

The both crossed on the ferry – and then took another ferry – to reach the beach where foreign tourists often visit. At the site, which took two hours of traveling from her employer's flat in Tsui Wo Hse, Tai Wo, to reach; her employer instructed Dewi to pick up the discarded cans, newspapers, and used bottles. Dewi had to fill her black bag full with the trash before she went back to the employer's flat.

"Lots of Indonesian migrant workers did this type of job, just like me. They became scavengers," she said in a bitter voice.

Since then she realized that her employer was a scavenger. Then, with or without her employer, she had to spend her days as a garbage picker. They didn't let her go home until her black bag was full with the discarded items.

But that was not the only job she had to do. She would also have to clean the used cans and to flatten them before she sold them at the used-items market in Tai Po.

She couldn't count anymore how many cans she had flattened during the time she worked for her employer. But she was certain that she earned 10 goci or 10 cents (around a hundred rupiah) for each can she sold. So, to get one HK dollar, she had to flatten ten cans.

"From each transaction, I usually received HK\$ 16 for the flattened cans and HK\$ 8 for the discarded newspaper," she said. And, of course, she had to hand all the money over to her employer.

Although she was annoyed with the job she did, she never complained. She also didn't protest when the employers began depressing her because they forced her to compensate them for their broken stuff with the rest of her wage, which after agency fee deductions was only HK\$ 320.

"I was forced to pay HK\$250 to compensate them for a rice cooker they once bought. In fact, I didn't break it. Indeed, it was an old rice cooker and unusable," she said.

She had to try to hold off until she became too impatient of their frustrating conduct. On the 16th of October, 2006, she left the flat. "I felt dejected after they commanded me to look for their son's

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glasses all night,” she said.

The story of looking for glasses is only a part of the many problems she had to deal with there. Not only the employers disturbed her, but also their children did too. Several times their first son almost beat her when he judged her too slow to prepare the discarded items for sale.

After she ran away, she got information from a fellow of Indonesian migrant worker that lived in a migrant workers organization’s shelter. She didn’t stay in the agency’s shelter because she refused to give them the last recruitment fee. “They hated me because I didn’t pay the last fee,” she said. But she didn’t care. She thought it was a reasonable deal as they didn’t do anything at all when her employer made her a scavenger.

At the organization’s shelter, she began to bring a suit against the employer with the Labor Department Hong Kong. She claimed damages of HK\$ 6,428; that’s the compensation for not paying her for the unpaid days off she had to work and for a one-way ticket to Indonesia.

While she was waiting for the result of her suit, she took part in various protests held by the organization, such as rallies for demanding higher wages and for eliminating discriminatory acts. She also joined with a survey team to investigate how many Indonesian migrant workers there are that are still underpaid.

Sometimes she was involved in a serious discussion with a number of Indonesian migrant workers in Victoria Park. She suggested to them that they claim their legal rights. She always showed her adolescent agility when she talked.

She also had a spontaneous impulse to help when she encountered an Indonesian worker sitting alone in Victoria Park. She brought her along to the shelter. “What a pity. She had been deceived by her agency, it’s just like my experience,” she said.

In late November 2006, she finally went home to Lampung following the Labor Department’s decree that she would receive a month’s unpaid wage. “Actually my parents never wanted me to go abroad. They said that working in foreign land is too risky,” she said.



Due to their thirst for knowledge and the lack of information available in Hong Kong about Indonesia, Indonesian migrant workers enthusiastically read an Indonesian tabloid during their rest days.



3. Sold By a Friend

THE WOMAN spoke too slowly, as if she didn't want to talk. Many times she adjusted her black head-scarf, tidying her hair that came out of it. Her face was so pale due to her lack of sleep. It seemed too hard for her to recall and to talk about the difficult experiences she had several months ago. However, she was determined to talk and wanted her story to be written down.

The tape recorder sat on the bench before her. She briefly stared at it with her sad eyes. She bit her dried lips until she went on with her story.

"I think she isn't human. She doesn't have any conscience. She sold me," she said furiously while her fist hit the bench.

"The man suddenly weighed me down, crushing my womanhood." The tears dropped from her eyes, but she didn't break down. "I had tried to struggle, but he was too strong for me. It became even worse. The harder I fought, the bigger his lust flared. He is an animal!" Her shoulders trembled from anger.

"He is crazy! He isn't human, but the devil!" Her crying exploded now, and it attracted the onlookers' attention.

For a while she tried to calm down. A pack of tissue had turned into paper balls, soaked by her tears. She threw them in to the trash can.

Next to the Jade Market, she was weeping while she sat alone on a bench. She was in the park in front of Temple Jordan, just across from Henry G Leung, Yau Ma Tei Community Center.

Her name is Suniarti - it isn't her real name. She is 28 years old and came from Grobogan, Central Java. Like most of the Indonesian female migrant workers, she went to Hong Kong to work, to ease her family's economic burden. Her husband, who is only a farm-hand, couldn't take care of all their family's needs. Upik - their daughter - was reaching school age. That meant that they - as good parents

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- had to save some money for their daughter's schooling costs.

So, Suniarti finally decided to go to Hong Kong. Unfortunately, it was just for four months that she worked at her job in Hong Kong before she decided to quit from her employer's flat. She couldn't any longer put up with the rude acts of the employer's grandpa who stayed with them.

He often beat her when one of four his grandchildren was being noisy or crying. She had tried to explain that she didn't do anything to cause them to cry. But he ignored her explanations. He never trusted her. He was angry and he beat her. She had always tried to bear the situation, hoping that she could finish the two-year contract. That was until one day he blindly hit her face, it was then she decided to save herself by leaving the house.

The following day she lived in the shelter of an Indonesian migrant workers organization located in Jordan. She also brought a suit against her employers, accusing them of committing abuse. However, she had to stay at the shelter because the Labor Department and police have to deal with lots of cases, and her suit was put at the bottom of their list.

While waiting for a resolution of her case, she spent most of her time enjoying Hong Kong's landscape; she couldn't do this during the time she worked at the employers due to the fact that they didn't give her a day off. She was happy when she could take up an offer from her friends to walk in Kowloon Park.

Becoming absorbed by the Kowloon Park panorama, she became separated from her friends. Even worse, they didn't have a cellular phone so she couldn't call them.

While she was confused and trying to find a way out of the Park, she met another Indonesian woman worker. The long and straight haired woman, who was beautifully attired, seemed nice. Furthermore, she bought her a pack of rice for lunch. Then she brought her to an apartment. She said she rented the house while she took a holiday.

"Come on, let's go to my rented apartment. We can take a rest there, rather than staying here where you will be attacked by these mosquitoes," the cute woman said. Suniarti took her offer. By taxi, they went to the house. Suniarti remembered that the house was dominated by white, as well as the bed cover.

There the woman gave her a soft-drink, and the woman even opened the cap for her. Then the woman said she would go out for a while to buy snacks. She told Suniarti to take a rest in her room. Suniarti lay down on the bed since she so suddenly felt a headache and very sleepy. She realized later that the woman had poured some drugs into the soft-drink.

Suniarti had been in a deep sleep until she was awoken due to being out of breath from being pinned under a big thing. She opened her eyes, seeing a big-body Pakistani man weighing her down. She didn't know when the man came in. She struggled hard to break away from his body, but she failed. Her clawing and crying even gave him more passion.

The mysterious man not only ripped her womanhood in the bed, he also dragged her to bathroom. She kept struggling so hard that her head hit the wall many times. But he didn't care. He even brutally stripped off all her clothes, showering and raping her again. It happened twice in the bathroom. Having satisfied himself, the man took a bath before he went out and stole her cellular phone and all the wages

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she had saved, HK\$ 300. She only realized it when she found the contents of her bag scattered all over the floor.

She wept loudly, but nobody cared. The pretty girl, who had gone out for a snack, did not come home. Crawling out from the bathroom while she felt the pain in her vagina, she left the house, where she realized it was only one of the cheap hotels in Mong Kok.

Unfortunately, she didn't get any help from the people she met nearby as she left the hotel. When she arrived at the main road and felt the blood flew out of her crotch, Suniarti met another Indonesian woman migrant worker who was picking up her employer's kid. She gave Suniarti some money to go back to the shelter.

At the shelter, Suniarti tried to cover up the rape incident since she was so embarrassed and insulted. She didn't tell her friends the real story. She only asked her two friends why they had left her in Kowloon Park even though she knew nothing about the Park.

Two days after the rape, she couldn't hold back anymore. She wept all day, her vagina was so itchy and she had a stomachache and was seized with belly cramps. It became worse because from her vagina flowed out mucus and a putrid smell. Of course, the shelter's residents were startled to learn about it, and she had to tell them what happened to hers. She told them that she was sold by an unknown Indonesian migrant worker to a Pakistani man.

With the help of the other shelter residents, she reported the incident to the police. So, now she had reported two cases, abuse and rape. Of course, the trials of the cases would be held in different times.

Meanwhile she continued to suffer from more bad luck because of the rape; she had genital warts, which would take a long time to heal. Once a week she had to get outpatient treatment at the Female Social Hygiene Clinic at the Yau Ma Tei Jockey Club General Outpatient Clinic, because the warts filled her vagina at times. Having the genital warts, she has even been kept apart from the shelter residents. They feared it would infect them. She realized that she had burdened the shelter even more because she often used the shelter's money for her treatment.

Unfortunately, she lost the two cases because she couldn't get enough proof against the employer's abusing grandpa and she couldn't submit witnesses for the rape case. Of course, the policemen had sketches of the woman and the Pakistani, but they were not able to arrest them. Therefore, she was forced to close the cases because she didn't want to stay any longer in Hong Kong.

When she went home to Indonesia, she got a one-way ticket to Indonesia and a month's unpaid wage and payment for missed days off; but she had to return the wage to the employment agency because she ran away from the employer when the job contract hadn't ended yet. In the end she only had HK\$ 150, even though she had waited for the resolution of her cases for six months. Meanwhile her genital warts still needed treatment for a long time.

"I won't protest if my husband divorces me," she said in a bitter tone while her eyes stared at the sky.

However, while she had been waiting for the resolution of her cases, she took part in several

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religious activities with an Islamic Organization in Hong Kong and in several demonstrations with others Indonesian migrant workers held by the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) and the Coalition of Indonesian Worker's Organizations in Hong Kong (KOTKIHO). She also joined with the rallies to protest underpayment, excessive agency fees, and the two weeks rule, although her shelter friends weren't always participating.



4. Ecstasy, Love, and Loneliness

THE written agreement was put on the table. Around it, several women sat with stiff faces. Lasmini – not her real name, because she doesn't want to mention her name – had to bear down to prevent tears dropping from her eyes.

That night, a day before she returned to Indonesia, she had to sign the debt agreement. Because of her careless deals in the trading of cellular phone cards with other Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong, she was trapped in a debt of HK\$ 32,790.

Actually, she was only indebted HK\$ 16,740, which was from the cards and some money she owed. However, she had to assume the interest since she was in arrears for two months already, and so her debts doubled.

Lasmini born on the 12th of April 1980 to a peasant family lived in a poor, small village in Ponorogo Residency, East Java. She has a twin brother who's currently working in Korea. They have such a close relationship it has made her boyfriend jealous.

Beside her twin, her parents have another child. Her parent's earnings, as farm-hands, have not been enough to sustain the family. Therefore, Lasmini didn't want to finish high school (SMEA PGRI Ponorogo) on the grounds that she wished to ease the family's economic burden; but she also admitted that she dropped out because of her adolescent mischief. She often cut classes, wandering around with her friends.

One day, she met Dasri, her childhood friend who had just returned from Hong Kong. She saw Dasri had become a successful person. Many said Dasri brought home lots of money, built a good



house and bought a rice field.

Lasmini was interested. She wanted work like Dasri. Then she asked permission from her parents to work in Hong Kong. Of course, she didn't get the permission because she only needed one more year to graduate from high school. Her parents wanted her to finish her studies before she decided to become a domestic worker in a foreign land.

However, she was a stubborn adolescent. Without the permission, she insisted on going to Hong Kong. Because she didn't know the procedure get a job abroad, she couldn't make her dream of working abroad come true as soon as possible. Next she went to her aunt's home in Rungkut District, Surabaya. A week after living with her aunt, she tried to do a menial job at Sampoerna Ltd, a tobacco factory.

Here, she met a new friend whose sister had previously worked in Hong Kong. Lasmini also obtained the phone number of a sponsor / broker who would be able to bring her to a recruitment agency. The broker lived in Malang, which was about two hours travel from Surabaya. She went to the broker.

Muksin, the broker, agreed to bring her along to Indonaker Mandiri Ltd (a recruitment agency) also in Malang. She remembered that it was in 2003 when she went to the agency, but she couldn't remember the month or date.

At the company, she chose to be placed in Taiwan. At the time, Taiwan was the favorite destination for many migrant workers because the minimum wage was higher than most other countries.

After staying at the agency for three months, she heard that a Taiwanese employer had picked her. The news made her so happy. However, days later she learned that Taiwan wouldn't accept migrant workers for a while. So, Indonesian migrant workers who had registered to get job in Taiwan, like Lasmini, were diverted to Hong Kong.

As a result, Lasmini and other potential migrant workers had to take a course in Cantonese and other training to do the job in Hong Kong.

During the training, Lasmini and seven other applicants decided to leave the agency. They thought the diversion from Taiwan to Hong Kong was a trick of the agency. They also felt that they had stayed in the agency for long enough, while they still had no certainty about their departure to Hong Kong.

They then asked the agency to return their school certificate and other documents, but the agency refused. They had to pay 1,500,000 rupiah if they wanted to get back their documents.

As they couldn't meet this demand, they finally ran away from the agency, leaving their certificate and other documents in the agency.

For three days, Lasmini stayed in a friend's home in Malang until she met Mochtar, another broker. Mochtar brought her along to Citra Catur Utama Karya Ltd, another agency also in Malang.

However, she had to falsify her identity to apply to Citra Ltd. By Mochtar's initiative, all her identities were changed. She used certificates and other documents belonging to relatives whose face was similar with hers.

"All my documents were false, including my identity card," she said.

A month after staying there, she received information that a Hong Kong employer had contracted

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her. Two months later she went to Hong Kong.

The employer was in fact herself agent in Hong Kong. So, when she arrived in Hong Kong on the 12th of August 2003, she started work as a domestic worker at once.

She earned a minimum wage of HK\$ 3,270 per month, like was required by the Hong Kong government. Still, she didn't get her whole wage for the first seven months as she had to pay agency fee of HK\$ 3,000 per month.

She never protested this because she thought it was the usual way. Also she didn't refuse when the employer only gave her days off twice a month; under Hong Kong law, she should get one day off a week.

Her duties were cleaning, cooking, raising two dogs, and nursing an old woman. The old woman was the mother of her employer. Meanwhile, her employer was not staying at the home. In the house, Lasmini only lived with the old woman and the employer's divorced elder brother.

She had to wake up every morning at 5:00 AM, and slept every day at the earliest at 10.30 PM. Her daily routine was to bring the old woman to the gym, clean the house, shop, cook lunch, clean, shop, cook for dinner, wash the dogs and take them walking around, and then sleep.

For three years and six months, she did these tasks. However, not all the tasks were completed smoothly. Sometimes she had bad days too.

During the first three months, she was almost fired as the employer learned that she couldn't cook. The employer had even already signed the layoff agreement. However, the old woman canceled it.

Lasmini recalled that the old woman was a kind person. She didn't have any problems with her. Nevertheless, sometimes she faced problem with the employer's divorced brother. After he separated from his wife and children, he lived in the house. He often harassed her. "He often touched my body and breast," she said.

Because she felt insulted by the harassment and oppressed by the memories of her home village, she sometimes had a bad attitude. To feel better she began using ecstasy pills.

She didn't recall exactly when she took the pills for the first time. She only remembered that it happened when she met an old friend in Victoria Park. At the time, she was enjoying her holiday.

The friend, just called her Dara, came to her with a group of tomboy Indonesian migrant workers. They were the tomboy community that she knew lived in Hong Kong.

She said she got to know the group of tomboys when she stayed in the agency shelter. Staying for long time in the shelter made Indonesian women migrant workers dependent on each other, some even had an intimate relationship.

"At the time, I didn't know why a girl was weeping when her friend went abroad at first," she recalled.

When she arrived in Hong Kong, she just understood there was a tomboy community of Indonesian migrant workers. In the community, there were migrant workers who were dressed up like boys, and there were those tomboys that still wore mini skirts and stockings. She knew that girls with stocking and



mini skirts were called “girlish-tomboys”, while those in shirts and trousers were called “macho-tomboys”.

Dara, her friend, is one of the “macho-tomboys”. Not all people in the tomboy community are lesbian, but Dara decided to become a lesbian.

At first, she met the tomboy group led by Dara in a casual setting, like seeing old friends. They chatted about the past and shared stories of their current conditions.

However in the following meetings, they didn’t only chat. Dara began to bring along Lasmini to a discotheque in Wanchai. A friend of Dara, just called her Made, gave Lasmini a pill. She told Lasmini the pill would ease her sadness and difficulties.

Believing in Made, she just swallowed the pill and proved that the Balinese migrant worker was correct. “After swallowing the pill, I felt full with pleasure as if my body was flying,” she said.

Then she felt so limp when she woke up the following day. However, these conditions didn’t stop her from consuming the pill again which she said made her comfortable. “At first I only consumed a quarter of the pill, then I started swallowing a half of one, and then taking an entire pill,” she said.

When she broke into the whole pill phase, Made began to ask her to pay for every pill she consumed. For each pill she took, she had to pay HK\$ 100. She didn’t know the name of the pill, but she remembered that she often swallowed the white pills. Meanwhile her friends sometimes consumed the blue, yellow, or pink ones. “The pink pills can arouse our lust,” she said.

She admitted that she became addicted since she routinely consumed the pills. Every time she consumed the pill, her body was so limp and sweaty.

Her social relationship with the tomboy group not only made her addicted to ecstasy, she had also become in love with girls. She confessed that she began to be interested to Made. She sometimes missed her when she didn’t see her. It was the same emotions she felt when she fell in love with her schoolmate; but the schoolmate was a boy.

Since falling in love with Made, Lasmini totally made herself up, dressed up with sexy skirts. She wanted to attract her attention.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t get Made’s love. The Balinese girl already had a girlfriend, another member of the group, and she didn’t want to become involved in three-way love affair.

Disappointed with the situation, Lasmini then saw Dani (also not her real name). Dani’s tomboy manner directly attracted Lasmini’s attention and made her fell in love with her.

Different from Made, Dani didn’t like narcotics or visiting the discotheque at all. Rather than spending time in the discotheque, Dani preferred to join with a worker’s organization. Because of this Lasmini began to know about an Indonesian migrant worker’s organization trying to advocate for their rights.

After becoming Dani’s girlfriend, she didn’t go to the discotheque again. She also stopped taking ecstasy. Instead she often joined with Dani’s friends from the organization, trying to find a solution to their problems and organizing rallies outside the Indonesian Consulate and the Central Government office of Hong Kong.

She had changed. Dani, although younger than her, had become her supporter. “I think she is a wise woman and I really love her,” she said shyly.

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She saw Dani as almost a perfect person. Therefore, she always approved of whatever Dani said or did, including the way she dressed and her attitude. Dani also told her to break with the tomboy group. Dani even said that she would leave her if Lasmini continued to be friends with them, go to the discotheque, or consume ecstasy anymore.

The ultimatum was really effective. Since then, Lasmini stopped and didn't want to break Dani's rules at all. She didn't want to miss her. She didn't even protest when Dani slapped her face when another tomboy kissed her.

Her relationship with Dani was already like a wife and husband. They couldn't separate themselves mentally or physically. Lasmini confessed that they have booked a hotel room in Causeway Bay every holiday. At the HK\$ 60-per-hour room, they had sexual intercourse. However, Lasmini said that they have never used "weird items" from sex shop.

Since they have become closer intertwined and inseparable, they decided to uncover their relationship and become engaged.

In the tomboy community, engagement or marriage are usual occurrences. Although they wouldn't sign any documents and their marriage wasn't officially confirmed, their wedding was going to be a big party; they were going to invite lots of people, renting a hall, buying lots of food, providing entertainment, and receiving wedding gifts. Some tomboy couples even held a traditional ceremony for their wedding.

In Lasmini and Dani's wedding, the party was held in a rented hall in Causeway Bay. However, only a few people came because the party was not held on Sunday when most Indonesian migrant workers get a day off. Originally, they planned to hold the party on Sunday. They had distributed invitations, rented the hall, and ordered the food, but Lasmini's employer didn't give her the day off. The employer said he planned to hold a big family gathering, and he asked Lasmini to help them. Although she had asked and complained about getting that day off, the employer didn't give her the holiday. So, Lasmini and Dani's wedding party was delayed. They only could hold the party on the following day.

After the wedding, Lasmini was aware that her life had changed. It didn't become easier, but harder. She never had good times anymore.

However, before the wedding, she was also disappointed in her parent's comments. She knew that they didn't use all the money she transferred to them for buying a home; they also didn't repair their house with the money. Her father bought a rice field, and he then sold it when his business failed.

She learned all these facts when she returned home during her annual leave after having worked in Hong Kong for three years. "Of all the money I transferred, in fact, only 22 million rupiah remained in the bank," she said.

Becoming angry with her father, she transferred the remaining money in to her account. She only stayed at home for ten days before she returned to Hong Kong.

Her parents were so angry with her. They also learned that she was involved in same sex love affairs. They knew it because they saw she often wept when she received phone calls from Dani.

Therefore, after she arrived back in Hong Kong, she didn't want to contact and transfer money to her parents anymore. Life went on, likewise her relationship with Dani continued.



But following the wedding, Lasmini was even lonely. She didn't have any more desire to work with the organization and participate in the activities that Dani took part in. Meanwhile she didn't go anymore to the discotheque because she didn't want to make Dani angry. She wanted to do something, but she didn't know what she could do.

The lonesome days went on until she had an idea to trade phone cards. At first, she was only a broker delivering the cards from the seller to people who needed them. Since she knew the potential big profits of the business, she decided to try it. Every Sunday, she would sell cards totaling between HK\$ 7,000 and HK\$ 8,000; and she would profit around HK\$ 100. "For each HK\$ 50 card, I have a profit margin of HK\$ 2," she said.

She took the cards from Omas – not her real name – an Indonesian migrant worker who was known as the "card boss" by Indonesian workers in Hong Kong. Omas is also a dealer of ecstasy pills; and before Lasmini often bought the pills from Omas.

The card business was good. Encouraged by the success, Lasmini tried to expand the business to four new areas, such as Mei Fo, Lai Chi Kok, Sam Shui Po and Po Lam. She also took more cards from Omas. She distributed the cards to retailers in the four areas, and then she repaid Omas; she profited from the difference in the prices.

The business made her so busy every Sunday. Coincidentally, after starting her second contract, she started to get one day off every week.

However, it didn't please Dani. She said that Lasmini had not been sparing enough time for her. She told Lasmini to quit the business. But Lasmini disagreed; she felt the business made her useful.

But the business did not always go smoothly. The retailers began often to delay the payments, although for each delay of HK\$ 50 payment she had to assume interest of HK\$ 10.

When she began to have a hard time contacting the retailers, she began to panic. She couldn't imagine how much debt she had to pay to Omas when the retailers didn't pay her for the cards. Furthermore, she had to assume the interest and her own debt of HK\$ 3,000 to Omas.

During this panicky situation, the employer's brother behaved indecently. The day, she recalled was Sunday the 19th February 2006 – just a day after Imlek. He was drunk and at home. He tried to rape her. Using all her effort, she was able to escape.

She ran to Victoria Park, crying all the way there. Dani wasn't there to calm her down since she had gone to Malaysia with her employer. Lasmini didn't know to whom she could tell this. Being Dani's girl friend, in fact, made her weak.

Since this was Imlek holiday time, there were many Indonesian workers walking around Victoria Park. Lasmini encountered the Made-led tomboy group. She agreed when they offered to bring her along to a discotheque. For two days, they went to the discotheque. "Because I didn't have any place to go home to, I slept at the white tent of Victoria Park every morning after I came back from discotheque," she said.

She had broken Dani's rules. With Made and her gang, she got drunk and consumed ecstasy again.

When the holidays ended, she didn't have any friends to go to the discotheque with. She began to

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rent a HK\$ 50-per-night room in Causeway Bay. The following day, another friend told her that she could stay at the shelter of an Indonesian migrant workers organization.

The shelter was a new world for Lasmini. The solidarity between the Indonesian workers who stayed at the shelter touched her heart. Furthermore, she had to deal with Dani's gruff criticism for hanging out with Made's gang while Dani was in Malaysia.

Dani didn't have any compassion for her, even after she learned that Lasmini was almost rape victim. Dani was only angry since Lasmini went with Made's gang when she couldn't handle the problem alone.

Dani was even angrier when she learned that Lasmini had become indebted to Omas for HK\$ 32,790 as result of unpaid phone cards, its interest, and other debts. This situation made Lasmini a target of Omas and her gang. They didn't only terrorize her by phone, but also by having people watching the shelter where she was staying.

Earlier, Omas had already taken Lasmini's passport and her job contract to prevent her from running away before she repaid all the debts. Lasmini actually needed the passport to bring a lawsuit against the employer. Omas kept refusing to hand the passport over, although Christian Action and Domestic Helpers and Migrant Workers Programmed (DMW) had intervened to return the passport to Lasmini.

Finally, Lasmini had to file a police report stating that she had lost the passport. With the notice, she got a travel document to substitute the passport from the Indonesian consulate.

To resolve her debt to Omas, she finally signed an agreement which was mediated by a third party. The agreement was signed after she won compensation from the lawsuit she brought against the employer. Through her suit against the employer she got HK\$ 10,700 for unpaid days off during her first contract.

All the money she handed over to Omas for paying some of her debts. She then promised to pay the rest of her debts after she went to Indonesia and returned back to Hong Kong. Meanwhile she had to close the rape case because she wanted to return to Indonesia as soon as possible.

Her homecoming in Indonesia was a sad episode. Fearing that Lasmini would break the agreement, Omas asked her to meet Omas's relatives in Jakarta before she went home to her village. So, when she arrived in Jakarta, she directly went to the bank, took out her money and handed it to Omas's relative.

"I was so sad. I had called my father and told him about it. But he didn't care. He wouldn't even admit that I was his daughter," she said, while she swiftly wiped away the tears dropping from her eyes.

Earlier, Omas's relatives in Malang had come to her parents' house, trying to collect her debts. Of course, her parents didn't pay. They didn't have enough money to pay the debts; her father was a cow seller and her mother was a clove trader in the traditional market.

Now, she was back in Indonesia, trying to find a way to go back to Hong Kong. She had to go through the entire recruitment process again, from the beginning. She had to stay in the agency's training center, and her first seven months of wages will be cut again for the agency fee.

If she returns to Hong Kong, she will earn money not only for her and parents but also for paying

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her debts. She still hopes for a better life. While staying in the shelter, she has tried to learn many things. She swears she will become a strong woman and be grateful to God for her life. Still, she has room in her heart for Dani. "I really love her," she said.



5. Sorrowed by a Debt of Honor

RINI, not her real name, decided to go abroad since she had a debt of honor. She, the sixth daughter of eight siblings, had a debt of honor to her former teacher's family who had supported her financially until she graduated from SMP (ninth grade).

Originally, the teacher wanted to sponsor her until she finished high school. However, the teacher didn't have enough money to do it, and so she asked her son to finance Rini's studies after she graduated from elementary school. Finally, he was only able to fund Rini until she finished junior high school. His household financials, in fact, weren't enough to support her to get a high school education. Nevertheless, Rini had no regrets. This girl, born on the 5th of November 1985 only has thanks to the teacher's family for financing her studies.

Born to a poor peasant family in Widodaren District, Ngawi Regency, East Java Province, she has never dreamed of getting a higher education. For her father it was hard to provide food three times a day for her family, even harder to finance her education.

It was more complicated when her mother gave birth to two more babies. So, her parents let the neighbor fund Rini's study. At the time, she was still in the third grade of elementary school and the kind neighbor was also her teacher.

"Her husband had died, her son had married and lived in his own home. So, she brought me to her home, letting me live with her," Rini said.

As a charity case, she was aware of her position in the teacher's home. She did all the domestic tasks without complaint. When the teacher fell on hard times she became determined to pay her debt of honor to the teacher by looking for a job abroad.

A month after she graduated from junior high school in Widodaren, she registered with the agency

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Srivan Jaya Abadi, a recruitment agency for migrant workers in Medan, North Sumatra. Earlier, she had registered with an agency in Solo, Central Java. There she stayed for seven days. Then, the agency brought her and 30 other women to Medan by bus. They traveled from Solo to Medan for four days.

In Medan, she lived in the agency shelter for 18 weeks before she went to Malaysia on the 24th of November 2002.

She worked for a kind employer in Malaysia. Although she didn't get much money and she also had to pay the agency fee with four months of her wages, she was glad to get the job there. She worked there for three years.

For the first contract, the employer gave her 380 ringitt per month. The wage was then raised to 400 ringitt per month during the second contract. After she paid four months of her salary for the agency fee, she began to transfer her wages to her home village. Because her parents didn't have a bank account, she used the account of the teacher's daughter in law for transferring the money. She asked the daughter in law to hand the money over to the teacher and her parents.

However, she knew later that her parents never received the money she transferred to them from Malaysia.

On the 11th of November 2005, she decided to go home. She refused when the employer asked her to finish the second contract. She was determined to find a job in Taiwan. She heard that Taiwan had higher wages for domestic workers like herself. "I wanted to be a success," she said, recalling her past determination. For her, success meant earning a lot of money. She wanted to build a house for her parents.

She was disappointed when she learned that all the earnings she sent from Malaysia never went to her parents. However, she didn't want to question the teacher's family because she thought that the money they took was for the "debts" she had to pay for compensating their kindness.

She kept looking for higher wages by trying to find a job in Taiwan. Unfortunately, she couldn't work in Taiwan because she was too short. The agency said that potential domestic workers must stand at least 150 cm tall, while she was only 148 cm. However, this didn't destroy her chances to work abroad.

The agency, PT Mitra Karya Sarana Nusa in Bekasi, West Java, then sent her to Hong Kong after she had been waiting and living in its shelter for five months.

When she arrived in Hong Kong on the 24th of May 2006, she didn't think that she would have bad days there.

The first incident happened when she had only worked for two weeks with her new employers in Tseung Kwan-O, Hong Kong. The male employer was an employee of a restaurant. He had to wake up early for work. Therefore, he asked Rini to open the door every day at 5.00 AM. However, the way he asked her was really indecent. He always went into Rini's room – Rini shared a bedroom with his ten year old daughter. He always squeezed her breast to wake her up.

She was actually angry because of his indecent acts, but she didn't loudly cry out because she



didn't want to wake his daughter up. With politeness, she asked him not to do that again. But he didn't care. Every morning, he always woke her up using the same rude ways.

She tried to endure this treatment. She wished his indecent ways would be over. However, the male employer became even more indecent. He then asked her to massage his body every time he came home. During the massaging, he forced her to grip his penis. He even told her to rub his penis until it ejaculated. It even happened when his wife was at home. "I felt disgusted. When he forced me to do that, I turned my face. After that, I went to bathroom to wash my hand," she said, weeping.

When the female employer was not home, he tried to rape her. He kept doing it even though his 20 year old son and his daughter were in the home. His children were in their own rooms, while he asked her to massage him in living room.

The following month the female employer even complained to the agency that Rini couldn't massage well. Fearing the loss of their monthly agency fee payment from Rini, the agency called her and told her to meet the employer's demand for massaging well.

Of course, she didn't follow the agency's instruction. She told them about the indecent acts of male employer. But they even asked her to bear with the situation until she could pay the entire seven months agency fee. After that, they said she could find a new employer.

"I had twice reported the employer's crude deeds to the agency, but they always give same answer," she said.

Unsatisfied by the agency's answer, she tried to look for help elsewhere. Another Indonesian domestic worker she met in a market told her about an activist Muslim organization of Indonesian migrant workers.

After discussions with the activists, she knew that she had to find proof of the employer's indecent deeds for reporting to the police. Then she pocketed a tape recorder for recording the proof. However, she was unsuccessful because the employer was suspicious. He even almost grabbed the recorder, but she quickly hid it and replaced it with her cellular phone.

Failing to get the proof, she became increasingly depressed. On the 4th of September 2006, she finally fled the house and stayed in shelter of the Muslim organization.

One day later, she complained about the employer's indecent deeds to the police in Wanchai. The following week, she initiated a suit with the Labor Department, demanding unpaid overtime days off during the three months she worked there.

Three months after submitting the lawsuit, she got her unpaid overtime of HK\$ 10,000 and a one way ticket to Indonesia. However, for the sexual harassment case, she had to wait a long time for a decree; and she didn't have any proof that it had happened.

The case was then handed to the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). The Commission advocates for the victims of sexual harassment or of sexual abuse, at times awarding compensation. However, the process takes a long time to be completed and often makes the victims impatient with having to wait and finally they chose to close the case instead of continuing to wait. Speaking about why she came to Hong Kong Rini said "I only wanted to make money, but I also took his crude things," she sighed.



The Indonesian Migrants Workers Union (IMWU), the first union for Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Asia with 100% of their members being women, organized a rally and march to their consulate to celebrate International Labour Day in 2007



6. “Man” from Tai Po

IT was early winter in December 2005. A group of youths wearing black and white uniforms and carrying banners were in front of a long rally moving from Victoria Park to the Central Government Office (CGO), Hong Kong.

The day was a week ahead of the sixth ministerial conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Thousands of Indonesian migrant workers rallied, attempting to deny the WTO members deals that will probably increase the number of poor people in developing countries.

The rally moving from Victoria Park to the CGO on Sunday the 4th of December 2005 had many Indonesian migrant workers who refused the neo-liberalism ideas dominating the conference.

Suddenly, young people in black and white uniforms quit from the ranks, walking impatiently to the policemen regulating the traffic.

An Indonesian journalist kept watching the young people. She tried to make sure that the short haired young person was a woman, one of the Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong. However, she doubted that the demonstrator was a woman. The demonstrator didn't behave in a feminine way.

Although she eventually chatted for a while with the demonstrator, she didn't ever learn anything about the woman without feminine ways, but her name: Vero.

It was March 2007. The cold weather of the late winter still sent shivers down many spines. In Tai Po, the buzz was coming from the second floor of the shop Abadi. It is an Indonesian shop which many Indonesian migrant workers use as meeting point.

Dozens of Indonesian workers were performing their individual activities on the second floor.



Some were chatting and others were eating. At the front of the second floor, two Indonesian workers sat side by side. They looked like a bridal couple. One wore a white lace dress and the other had on a formal suit and tie.

The hip-hop music rocked people. Two women in tomboy attire danced to the music. In the corner, a woman wearing a white shirt and trousers stood alone and quiet. She read the paper in her hand. Tears slowly dropped from her eyes. She took off her glasses, wiping her eyes and preventing more tears from flowing to her cheek.

However, two couple's eyes kept watching her. "Of course, you have the true tomboy style, but you still cry when you read something of yourself," one watcher said.

She smiled, showing the paper she read. It was a page of an Indonesian newspaper publishing an article about her.

Her name is Vero, the woman who met an Indonesian journalist in Victoria Park, in December 2005. She was born in Muntilan, on the 11th of November 1976, with the beautiful name Veronika Santa Amina. But she prefers it if you call her Vero. She is well known among the tomboy communities of Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong.

The tomboy community from Tai Po was popular. They often performed in Victoria Park, showing their dancing talents in festivals held by Indonesian migrant worker's organizations or taking part in various events held by government or private organizations.

Not all of them are lesbian. However, it is doubtless that they, who are lesbian, play a big role in the community. One of the lesbian tomboys is Vero. She has even become a spiritual adviser at tomboy weddings.

She also took part in the activities at the Abadi Shop in mid March. She had to lead the wedding ceremony of a couple from West Java, Randika (28) and Anis (28). Randika is not her real name. Her parents named her Fahrardini. She, of course, is a true woman. She is already married and has a five year old son. Since her childhood, she has been brought up like a boy by her father. Although she has married and has a son, she couldn't love her husband.

She left for Hong Kong three years ago and since then she has worked as a domestic worker in Tai Po. After coming to Hong Kong she couldn't stop her interest in women. And then she met Anisa who is often called Anis, a widow with one child coming from Indramayu, West Java.

Her husband was not able to do anything when she decided to marry Anis. Meanwhile Anis explained that she began to love women after she came to Hong Kong, three years ago. She said she really loves Randika. "For me, she is my true man. I always feel safe and comfortable when I'm with her," she said.

They spent HK\$ 7,000 to hold the wedding party in the Abadi Shop. They, who each earn HK \$ 3,400 per month, had to use their savings for the party.

There was no legal witness or formal document they had to sign for the marriage, although the party was same as the usual wedding ceremony. Food and beverages were overwhelming. An MC guided the party. There was entertainment, and they took time for family photos.

This was not the first time for Vero to lead and "to formalize" the marriage of tomboy spouses.

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Earlier, in November 2006, Vero wedded a lesbian couple from Blitar and Purwokerto. At that time, they held a traditional Javanese wedding ceremony. The bride dressed in kebaya and the groom wore beskap (“kebaya” and “beskap” are traditional Javanese dress). There was also gending, Javanese music, during the ceremony.

Most Indonesian migrant workers see such a party as just a gathering, like a birthday party. There is no sacred moment. It is only like a “bridal play” which is often performed by kids.

There is no legal document for them to sign. The party is only a meeting to announce they have already become spouses, and so they hope other people won’t interfere in their relationship.

However, some Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong think the ceremony is a sacred moment. They argued that such a wedding is a serious commitment after which they won’t share their love with their husband in Indonesia.

Nevertheless, the seriousness of the event sometimes made Vero fidget. More lesbian couples came to her, asking her to bless their wedding. Some couples even consulted with her how to hold the wedding ceremony when they have different faiths.

“Imagine, why do they consider these complicated things? This is not a real wedding,” she sighed.

She showed a photograph. On it, two sweet, spoiled, dimpled girls lean on her. “They are my daughters,” she said. The picture also showed a longhaired man hugged her from behind. “He is my husband,” she said.

The photo was taken in December 2006 as she spent her two week annual leave in her home village Margomulyo, Dukun District, Muntilan Regency.

In the picture, she looks not different from the way she is normally dressing in Hong Kong with saggy pants and a casual shirt. In the photo she wore short pants and a singlet that showed her tattoo. “That’s a non-permanent tattoo. But the villagers didn’t know if it is permanent or not. They only know that it is a real tattoo,” she said, smiling.

In the photo she seemed to reveal her true identity. She refused to pose in a feminine way before her family, other relatives and even her parents in law.

Not only to her friends in Hong Kong did she confess that she is a lesbian, but she also told her husband – a man who married her when she had just graduated from high school.

However, her husband was not angry upon learning this. He didn’t protest when his wife repeatedly received phone calls from her lover in Hong Kong. “My husband only said, ‘Be patient, girl. At home, she is mine’,” she giggled, recalling her husband words.

Of course, she loves her husband. She married him by choice. She even had to struggle against obstacles from her and his family about their plan to marry. His parents refused the marriage because her husband is the only child in his family and they underestimated her.

But the plan went on. They married at that time because he made her pregnant. She said the sex had brought her into the marriage early, that she was too young for it.

When she gave birth to two babies, she became very nervous. She didn’t know if she would be good mother for her daughters. She decided to go to Hong Kong in 2003, and her husband and her

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family gave her their permission.

Seeing thousands Indonesian female migrant workers in Hong Kong, she felt as if she were going back to her adolescence. She said she has preferred women more than men since she was in high school. The sex dragged her into marriage with her husband.

Now that she was in a female community, her “masculine side” was reborn. “I like to see the beauty of women; I always want to protect them,” she said frankly.

When she told her husband the truth, he wasn’t angry at all. “My husband knows that I have a girlfriend here. It is better for me to love a woman than being raped by Pakistani or Nepali man,” she said.

More than 100,000 Indonesian women work as domestic workers in Hong Kong. There are almost no male Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong. Non-professional sector employment in Hong Kong is dominated by Pakistani, Nepali, and Indian men. They often woo Indonesian women workers who have been separated from their husband or their lover. By giving them a little attention, they can get the love of the women, and even enjoy their bodies. Lots of Indonesian women went home with their new baby, and there is no man admitting the baby as his child. Some Indonesian women workers also got venereal diseases after they were raped.

Vero’s choice of being lesbian, of course, has helped her avoid becoming a rape victim. But what can she do about her emotions and caring for her family, including her husband, daughter and her parents?

“I don’t want to be a hypocrite. All of my family knows about my life,” she said briefly.

The picture, which was taken in December 2006, shows the happy faces of wife and husband and their two dimpled girls; they sit together on a sofa, giving each other their big hugs.

“Mom, don’t be lesbian anymore, please!” The words came out of her youngest daughter, just before she returned to Hong Kong. She couldn’t respond.

She gave a bitter smile recalling her youngest daughter’s words. “I don’t know, I really don’t know,” she said, inhaling the cigarette.

The lesbian community in Tai Po, of course, considers her as “the elder”. However, she worries about it.

She knew that her going to Hong Kong would make her family proud. So did her husband and her daughters. They put photographs of her activities in Hong Kong, including pictures of her in tomboy attire, in their living room. “I don’t want to be a hypocrite. I don’t want to cover it up. I’ll take responsibility for everything I did,” she said.

Her two daughters are proud of her masculine ways. “They said, I’m more handsome than their father,” she giggled.

However, when asked what her plans are, she said she doesn’t know. Surely, she won’t divorce from her husband, although she loves a woman right now.

In December 2006, her family asked her to go home because her father would retire after being the village chief for two terms. He hoped her husband would replace him in his position. She refused. If she agreed, she has to live forever in the village, accompanying her husband who will become the chief

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of the village. “No. I can’t do it,” she said.

She only went home during her annual leaves. After that, she returned to Hong Kong. She doesn’t think of her future. She only wants to enjoy her current free life. She doesn’t even need to send her monthly wages to her home village anymore. Her husband’s salary is enough to support the family. Meanwhile her parents have big salaries and can finance the costs of her two sisters’ study. Her three elder brothers have married and live independently in other cities.

Now, in Hong Kong, she tries to find her identity and the faces of her daughters in the village of Muntilan sometimes cross her mind.



Thousands of Indonesian domestic workers participated in the march and rally organized by The Hong Kong Coalition of Indonesian Migrants Workers Organization (KOTKIHO) in 2007, rejecting the Hong Kong race discrimination bill.





7. The Silent Twists of the Dancer

HER name is closely associated with the origins of the dance she performs. She is Euis Suhartini, born in Subang on the 4th of March, 1975. Among Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong, her ability to twist in the Jaipong dance is well known. Several styles of the dance are even her original creations.

Because of her fluid twists, she is often appointed as “a special envoy” for the workers union she joined, to perform the dance at events in Hong Kong.

One of the events was held in Saikung in early September 2006. During this meeting of members of the unions from three countries (Indonesia, Philippines, and Hong Kong), she performed a Sundanese (ethnic group from West Java) folk dance.

A skilled dance member from the Hong Kong Domestic Workers General Union (HKDWGU) was charmed by swinging of her hips. She joined in, following Euis’s moves. But she finally had to quit after she repeatedly tried to follow along to the jolting rhythms. Of course, it is not easy to perform the Jaipong dance.

Euis, who comes from Subang, West Java, learned it by doing. “I seriously perform the dance here (Hong Kong). I’ve never formally learned it. I only saw other dancers and learned it from the DVD,” she said.

Many people often wait to watch her perform. They think it is an incomplete event if they don’t see Euis dancing during it. Unfortunately, her performance in the Sai Kung meeting in early September was, in fact, her last dance. Almost two weeks after the meeting, she had to pack her things, going home to Subang.

It was not her choice. She has to go home after her employer unilaterally fired her and broke the job

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contract.

It happened because she forgot to pay her last debts. Her employer received the notice from debt collector when she went to Shen Zhen, China, to extend her visa.

Returning from Shen Zhen, she found the sour face of her employer. She even had to wait for an hour until they opened the door for her. When the door opened, they soon attacked her, saying they don't want to see bad people in their home. The phone calls and the debt notice made them fear that some bad thing will happen to their family. Beside that, her activities and her Jaipong performances had embarrassed them. One time after performing the dance, she directly returned to the employer's flat, not removing her make-up first. Seeing her make-up, the employer thought that her dance activities had brought bad behavior out of her.

"When I was wearing a head scarf, my employer was glad. They said, I was a good domestic worker," she said.

It was an unusual experience. Indonesian women working as domestic workers in Hong Kong usually have to hide their Islamic identity. Most of them only wear a head scarf when they are going out of the employer's home. Many have to quietly pray in the bathroom as their employer would be angry if they saw them pray in the open.

Her employers are different from others. They, both the male and female employers, have graduated from the university. They are tolerant towards other faiths. They never banned her from doing her five-times-a-day ritual praying. They also never prevented her from reading the Koran in her room. They said it's better for her to do the religious rituals than to wander out and to make friends with strange people.

However, her life didn't always follow what they wanted. As the days went by, she met many new people and became involved in her new community. She began to express herself.

At the time, she joined the Indonesian migrant workers union. There she learned that not all the Indonesian workers in Hong Kong were as lucky as her. Not all of them enjoyed a day off every week and received their full wages – by Hong Kong minimum wage standards – as she did.

And so she needed to do something. She thought that a change had to be made. Not only victims should seek to fix the problems, but everyone who has solidarity could do it. She began to actively take part in the organization's activities, learning about migrant workers rights, writing pamphlets about it, distributing them to other Indonesian migrant workers. She also learned how to advocate for them.

The activities pleased her, making her useful. During the migrant workers union's events, she began performing the Jaipong dance. She shared her talent with other Indonesian migrant workers and all the dance lessons were free. She freely shared her knowledge of it. She believed it's good to share her life with them.

Everything went well until she ran in to her problems, crushing her future.

Although she is the younger of two siblings, she is a person whom her entire family relied on, particularly since she began working in Hong Kong in May 1999. Her husband, who married her in August 1997 a month after he lost his job, also depended on her earnings.

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Working in a foreign land was her last choice after she got nothing from the jobs she had been working since she graduated from tsanawiyah (ninth grade of Islamic school).

She, of course, wasn't able to get a higher education. Her parents' earnings as farm-hands weren't enough to finance a higher education. However, it isn't easy to find job by relying on her tsanawiyah certificate. After being unemployed for a year she found a job working as a laborer at a shoe factory in Cikampek, West Java. She earned 160,000 rupiah per month, doing the job for 9 hours a day – from 08.00 am to 05.00 pm. She often worked till 08.00 pm for overtime wages.

She worked there for six years by which time her wages went up to 300,000 rupiah per month. But the factory went bankrupt in 1997 as a result of the Asian crisis and she was jobless again.

Even worse, it happened a month before she married her boyfriend. "We already did all the preparations, and suddenly I was fired," she recalled. Unfortunately, the steel factory where her boyfriend, Acep Rudi, had been working, also laid him off. So, they both were jobless when they married in August 1997.

Without earnings, they lived in his parent's house. Of course, it was not a favorable situation. She then looked for job in a jacket factory in Tangerang. Meanwhile her husband stayed at home drinking heavily as he was frustrated by the realities of being unemployed.

Unfortunately, at the jacket factory she got a lower wage than the job she did in Purwakarta, although she worked for 9 hours per day. She didn't even make enough to support herself. After seven months working there she decided to quit.

Then she really became dependant on her parents. It seemed her husband did not care at all. He said he had already tried to find a job, but had failed. He wanted to work abroad, but he didn't have the money to pay the recruitment agency.

The uncertain situation went on for months until she saw her former elementary schoolmate. The old friend had just come back from Hong Kong and was working in a recruitment agency in Bandung. Earlier she often wrote Euis while she was working in Hong Kong, saying that Euis's life will change if she wanted to follow her to Hong Kong. "*Aya jalan komo meuntas,*" wrote in Sundanese. It means, there is a way out of poverty.

When the old friend came home to Indonesia, Euis said that she was interested in her suggestion. Her friend brought her along to the employment agency Graha Ayu Karsa, where she worked. She quickly registered with the agency.

At the agency, Euis told her to say that she had already worked in Malaysia. Her friend said it would allow her to get the full minimum wage in Hong Kong. At that time, the minimum wage for migrant workers was HK\$ 3,860. She was happy when she learned how high the wage was. She said, she wouldn't protest if she only got HK\$ 2,000 like other migrant workers who hadn't already worked abroad.

She stayed at the agency's training center for five months. She enjoyed the time at the shelter because she had a close-connection with her friend there. She didn't need anyone's permission to go around. She even became the chief for coordinating the center's residents, as she was friendly and likeable. Finally, she signed the job contract stating that she would receive the full wage just before she went to

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Hong Kong in May 1999.

In Hong Kong, she worked for kind employers who lived in Chai Wan. After paying the seven months agency fee, she was able to transfer HK\$ 3,000 to her parents every month. “The employer gave me full wages. I also took a day off each week and national holidays. If I didn’t have the day off on the holidays, my employers gave me compensation. So, in a month, I sometimes got HK\$ 4,000 or more,” she said.

Every month she sent HK\$ 3,000 to her parents. Meanwhile she had a plan for her husband. She saved all the rest of her wages. After the first contract was over, she surprised her husband by buying him a rice field. She hoped her still unemployed husband could use the rice field for creating a business.

However, it didn’t please him. When she came home after finishing her first contract, he asked her to send him money, like she did for her parents.

She couldn’t refuse his demands. After signing the second contract with the same employer, she began to send money to her husband, not to her parents. He said he wanted to buy a car to support his business. She didn’t know what business he did. After she regularly sent the money for two years, she heard her husband bought a Kijang Grand car that he was very proud of it.

When the second contract ended, she didn’t go home. She decided to stay in Hong Kong. Actually, she wanted to go back home and to stay in Indonesia forever. But she cancelled the plan as she presumed her husband was being unfaithful. She believed her husband had a mistress, as she often couldn’t call his phone.

Since she began working in Hong Kong, her husband lived in his parent’s house in the same village as her parents. She usually called him at least once a week, giving in to her deep longing for him. One day after she couldn’t contact him for several weeks, she called her parents in law. They said that her husband often went out with her new car. They didn’t know where he went. When she tried to contact his cellular phone, he didn’t respond. After a while he responded, saying that he couldn’t hear the phone ringing since he was so busy, but she didn’t believe it.

Then she decided to sign a job contract with another employer. Five months later, an incident ruined her world. At the time, the employer had given her time off for going to Indonesia. She was so glad because she hadn’t been home for more than two years. She was eager to see her parents and her husband.

Soon she called her husband’s cellular phone, eager to tell him the good news. The phone was answered at once. She didn’t hear his voice, but a strange woman’s. She was then even more suspicious of her husband. The following day, his cellular phone was turned off. When she called his parents, he coincidentally answered it. He said that he had sold the cellular phone. Then he told her his new number. For a while her suspicions faded. That was until she phoned his new number and she again heard this strange woman’s voice. That time, he tried to explain that the woman is his neighbor. Earlier, by sms, his younger brother had told her that her husband was never home.

He explained that he left his family’s house because he had to work at his business, although he didn’t tell her what the business was. She didn’t believe him. She phoned his parents, and they told her that her husband had sold the car. When she called him, asking about selling the car, he said that he sold the car



to bribe someone who had promised a job for him. He said the man never gave him the job. When she asked what business it was that he did, he said it was a billiard house.

She cried loudly upon hearing this. "I had worked very hard, he even lied me," she said, while tears dripped from her eyes.

Over the phone, she said she wanted to divorce from him. Coincidentally, her employer overheard what was happening. He saw she was crying while talking on the phone. He asked her about the problem. When she told him the story the employer tried to console her. He even gave her the holiday off so she could go home and solve the problem.

In January 2004, she returned to Indonesia. At home, she had to swallow another bitter pill again. Without her approval, her husband had in fact collected her debts from her friends.

She said, she had often helped her friends in Hong Kong as a witness when they borrowed money from a Hong Kong bank. However, they didn't always pay off their debts before returning to Indonesia, so the debt collector came to her as their witness and she paid. Beside that, some friends asked her to pay their debts, and then they repaid it to her later.

However, her husband knew all this and collected the debts from her friends in Indonesia. The total debts he collected amounted to 13 million rupiah. He had spent all the money, giving her nothing when she came home.

She was angrier when she heard about how her husband had collected the money. He told her friends that her father was ailing and needed some money for medical treatment. Actually, her father was healthy. Knowing all his lies, she decided to split from him. She went to her parents in law, accompanied by several village figures, such as the chief of the village. She said frankly that she wanted to divorce him. They agreed to split right away that night. She took a week for resolving other things. After that, she returned to Hong Kong, carrying her broken heart.

Fortunately, she still had good friends in the migrant workers union. Her activities in the organization and her performance of the Jaipong dance slowly helped to heal her broken heart.

However, she began to be trapped in other circles of debt. It happened when her father really was sick after her divorce, and so she had to send more money to her parents. Her monthly wages were in fact not enough to finance her father's treatment. She became indebted to a lending agent with high interest. Following months were spent earning money just to pay the debts.

She had also paid for the building of her parents' house by. September 2006 was the last month she had to pay, then her debts would be gone. Because she had to go to Shen Zhen to extend her visa, she forgot to pay that final payment on the 1st of September. So, her employer found the debt collector's notice. "I paid it on the 4th of September, but I had already been fired," she said sadly.

On the 3rd of September 2006, her employers wrote to the Immigration officials that they fired her on the grounds of her financial problems and her bad performance.

This explanation sounded exaggerated because on other layoff cases the employer fired the migrant worker because they were incompetent or not able to communicate well. But that was that. Her employer had broken the contract one year before it was over.

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After the firing, she tried to stay in Hong Kong, looking for a new employer. Unfortunately, she didn't get a new job. All the agencies said they couldn't find a new job for her because she had a bad record. And so she, the Jaipong dancer, decided to go back to Subang.

Does she feel hopeless? No. She still wants to work again in Hong Kong. She is ready to go through all the processes again for getting the job. However, she also wants to realize other dreams. She wants to start a course in Jaipong dance so that she can teach and introduce her new creations.



8. Out of the Ordinary Stream

THE cold air in Hong Kong in December 2005 made people shiver. And so it did Intan, an Indonesian migrant worker that came from Polmas, West Sulawesi.

However, in the breezy weather, she decided to jump into the cold seawater, joining with dozens of people protesting the arrogant World Trade Organization (WTO). The Sixth Ministerial Conference of the WTO held in the Hong Kong Convention Centre (HKCC) was coming to its last meeting day where they were agreeing to agricultural and trading sector deals including negative effects for people in developing and underdeveloped countries.

Since early December, just before the conference was held, Intan and thousands Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong campaigned and protested against the deals the WTO thrust upon underdeveloped and developing countries.

Her bravery jumping into winter seawater, water so cold it would shiver everyone to the bone, was not predicted at all by her friends. She was the only Indonesian woman joining this courageous act.

As the oldest of seven siblings, the woman born on the 19th of June 1973 and named Dara Intan Thalib, since her childhood always refused to be the obedient one. She has even faced her father armed with a blade in anger when he decided her naughtiness had become intolerable.

She had made friends with bad guys, drinking liquor, sniffing narcotics, and blackmailing. However, she didn't like casual sex. Every time she was going with the bad guys, she always tried not to be drunk since she didn't want to become a rape victim.

She decided to join with the gang after high school as she was not able to study at the university



following her graduation. As the oldest daughter, she had to give her brothers the first chance to enjoy a higher education. Moreover, she thought she was just a woman; her brothers needed higher education because they would become people whom their family depended on.

However, her willingness to give in hurt her inside. She was angry at the situation and wanted revenge against this “men’s world”. This is when she began to enter the bad guy’s community in her village.

For three years, she went with the community until her father was very angry and made her run away to Makassar. “He pushed the blade against me, wanting to kill me,” she recalled.

In Makassar, she lived with her aunt. A month after living there and being jobless in the city, her mother came, offering her a domestic worker job abroad. She soon agreed to do the job. She wanted to show her relatives that she could do something useful.

She then registered with the employment agency Trimurti Citra Bahari in Makassar, staying there for six months. In August 1996, she went to Hong Kong, working for a family in Tun Muen. Her duties were housecleaning, cooking and looking after a four-year-old child. Meanwhile the spouse hiring her left for work early every morning and just came home late at night.

Because it was a small flat and only had one bedroom, Intan always slept in the living room on a thin rug protecting her from the cold and hard floor. She didn’t protest. For her, it was one of the hardships she has to accept to work abroad. However, she couldn’t stand this job because the employer was fussy about everything she did. They banned her from receiving phone calls, complaining about everything she did.

One night, the female employer woke her up, asking her to prepare dim sum. Still sleepy, Intan did it before she slept again. The employer decided she was incompetent and couldn’t prepare the dim sum correctly. The employer viewed her as impolite because she immediately slept after she made the dim sum. “She threw the things against my face,” she recalled.

The employer’s attitude fuelled her anger, although she tried to keep doing the job since she didn’t want to go back to Indonesia before she earned enough money.

Later, after she met a domestic worker from the Philippines in a market, she learned that her agency and her employers had cheated her because they forced her to sign the job contract listing her wages as HK\$ 2,000 and one day off a month. She even had her wage cut by HK\$ 200 when she took a day off under her contract, so she only earned HK\$ 1,800 a month although the minimum wage in Hong Kong was HK\$ 3,870 and Hong Kong laws gave her the right to one day off a week.

She knew her employers had unfairly treated her. So, she tried to find ways to get fired because if she asked to quit from the job, she has to pay them compensation of a month’s wage.

The moment had arrived when the employer was angry as seeing her washing a cup late. When the employer asked if she liked working there, she said no. “I said I didn’t like it because she didn’t treat me as human,” she said.

Her answer instantly made the employer furious. Around 1:00, late at night, the employer called her agency, asking her to pack her belongings and go back to the agency shelter. That day was just a month after she started working at the employer’s flat.

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Arriving at the shelter, she protested to the agency, questioning her wages and holidays. The agency told her that wages and holidays are already set in her earlier agreement and can't be changed. But she didn't accept that answer. She also refused when the agency urged her to be bear with the employer's attitude.

A month after staying at the shelter, the agency finally sent her back to Indonesia. They gave her HK\$ 1,000 and a one way ticket from the employer. It appeared the agency couldn't take her criticism any more.

In Indonesia, she only stayed at her parents' house in Polmas for a week and then moved to her aunt's home in Makassar. Several months later, she re-entered the former agency's training center.

Here she had to wait for six months until she found a new job abroad. Because the agency knew that she had been trained already and had already worked in Hong Kong, they asked her to work for a family in Makassar for wage of 50,000 rupiah per month. Among the migrant workers, doing such job is usually called field training. Usually, the agency gets some money from the people hiring the worker.

While she was doing the field training, she heard that her former employer in Hong Kong wanted to hire her again because their child liked her. But she refused the job. She preferred to work for a new employer rather than the former.

Five months later, the agency told her that a new employer in Hong Kong would hire her. In June 1997, she went to Hong Kong. This time, she worked for a new employer in Sai Kung. At first, they promised to give her the full minimum wage for migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. Then, on the grounds that she didn't finish her first contract, they only paid her of HK\$ 1,800 per month and deducted the first two months of her wages to pay for accommodations and the departure fee. The new contract also said she would only get one day off every two weeks.

After working there for seven months, she began consider several ways to be fired because her employers weren't paying her the minimum wage. She implemented her way-out plan by refusing to wash a cup, serving coffee to her employer in a used and still dirty cup. Of course, the employer was very angry, firing her and instantly returning her to the agency.

Three days later, the agency placed her with a new employer in Tuen Mun. For this job, the agent cut her first month's wage. Again, she only was paid HK\$ 1,800 per month.

In the new place, she had to work for a very fussy old woman. "The old woman often insulted me," she said. The old woman also asked her to do menial jobs in the garden, so every day she has to deal with work, mud, and cultivation.

Six months later, she tried to be fired again. Again she found an easy way to be fired. She knew the employer wouldn't like it if she had a boyfriend. So, Intan put her photograph, which showed her and a Nepalese man she met on the Star Ferry, on her desk so the employer would easily find it.

This tactic worked. The employer quickly complained to the agency about Intan's behavior. One week later she told Intan to leave her house.

The agency then sent her back to Indonesia. She also didn't want to register again with this agency in Makassar. In her diary, she had already noted the information about a good agency. She got the information about the good agency from an Indonesian migrant worker she met in Hong Kong. She



decided to use this agency for getting a job again in Hong Kong.

The agency, as she noted in her diary is Duta Wibawa based in Duren Sawit, Jakarta. She decided to go to the agency after she spent a month more living in her parents' house.

However, the traveling to Indonesia from Hong Kong was not an easy journey. She had to play tag with the former agency who wanted to pick her up again after she returned from Hong Kong. "The original agency usually picks up their migrant workers when they arrive at the airport," she said.

Fearing being brought back to the former agency she avoided the agency staff who were trying to pick her up at Juanda airport, Surabaya. She quickly caught a bus and then traveled by ship to Makassar. From Makassar, she went to her parents' house in Polmas.

While staying in the city for a month, she fell in love with a man who is two-years-older than her. However, considering her responsibility as the oldest daughter, she didn't continue her relationship with the man, deciding instead to go to the agency Duta in Jakarta to get a job again in Hong Kong.

Late in 1998, she left Makassar again. Before arriving at Jakarta, she stopped by Yogyakarta, to see her brother who was studying at the Indonesian Art Institute. She had assumed most of the costs of her brother's study. She even bought him an Astrea motorcycle. "At the time, the HK dollar had a very good exchange rate against the rupiah," she recalled.

When she arrived at Yogyakarta, her brother wanted to sell the motorcycle to pay for his school fees. She knew already knew about his plan. Her brother promised to hand over some of the earnings from the sale to pay for her trip to Jakarta. However, she only took a small portion of the earnings. Of the 7,000,000 rupiah from selling the motorcycle, she only took one million rupiah.

She went from Yogyakarta to Jakarta by car. She remembered that the Jakarta sky was still dark when she arrived early in the morning at the capital for the first time. She didn't have any relatives there and the only address she knew was the agency's which she hadn't ever seen before.

Nevertheless, she wasn't tricked. When all the other passengers had been dropped off, and only she and the driver were alone in the car, the driver tried to convince her to go along to a motel. He said it was hard to find the address at night. She didn't trust him and she quickly asked him to stop the car and he dropped her off at once. Ignoring the driver's arguments, she asked a motorcycle taxi to take her. When she showed the address of the agency, Duta Wibawa, the motorcyclist only took five minutes to bring her to the office.

She remembered that the office of Duta Wibawa was so different from her former agency in Makassar. Duta had a big office and three training centers for potential migrant workers who would be employed in three different countries.

A security-man approached her, asking what it was that she needed. After she explained, he instantly brought her along to director of the agency. He told the director that he has a potential migrant worker named Intan. The security man was hoping for some money by introducing her as his migrant worker. But the director didn't believe him, asking him to go out from the room and then talking with Intan alone.

The director immediately tested her by spontaneously speaking in Cantonese. Of course, it was

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an easy test as she had work experience in Hong Kong.

Satisfied with the interview, the director instantly accepted her, not examining the several application documents she had prepared. At the agency, she stayed for three months. During this period, the agency asked her to teach Cantonese to other potential migrant workers who will go to Hong Kong.

She enjoyed living in the shelter. She even had a small business and received some income from it. In the shelter, she always began her days by waking up early. At 4:00 am, before the office began its activities, she went to the traditional market buying cakes priced at 150 rupiah each and then sold them to the other shelter residents for 300 rupiah per cake. With her initial capital of 200,000 rupiah, she earned good profits from the business.

The business had been going well for two months until a staff member of the agency learned about it. Then the agency stopped allowing her to go out and in without first getting permission. But she didn't give up. With her friend's help, she could get out of the shelter and still buy the cakes. She remembered an old woman vendor in the nearby market place who was so glad to see her because Intan always bought up all the fried banana cakes the woman had.

Selling the cakes was not her only business, she also became the barber for the training center residents. She had never taken a course to become a barber. She even admitted that she didn't know the proper method of cutting hair, but the residents trusted her to cut their hair. "I only relied on my feelings. Because I only charged 3,000 rupiah, they preferred me for cutting their hair rather than going to a barbershop and paying 6,000 rupiah," she said.

From her businesses she was able to save two million rupiah in the three months she stayed there; she sent the one million rupiah from the sale of the motorcycle to her mother in Polmas just before she left for Hong Kong.

In March 1999, she signed a new contract with a Hong Kong employer. This time, she would be paid according to the minimum wage in Hong Kong; she even got a wage higher than the minimum since the employer compensated her for two days off a month. She worked there for four years and had to pay the Hong Kong agency her first six months wages for agency fees.

In 2003, she moved to a new employer in Happy Valley. Here she worked for three more years. There were no problems with the new agency. She adapted well. She even had spare time for playing the guitar, which has been her favorite instrument since she was in high school.

She also added to her spending money by teaching guitar playing to other Indonesian migrant workers. For 10 sessions, she could get HK\$ 350 from each pupil in the course.

Also in 2003, thanks to her guitar talent, she began to join with the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU), the only Indonesian union in Hong Kong.

She remembered the first time she took part in IMWU activities when a member of IMWU asked her to show her talent in Tsim Sha Tsui for the Kartini Day festival held by the Coalition of Indonesian Migrant Workers Organizations (KOTKIHO), an umbrella organization of which IMWU was one of its members. She also performed with an Indonesian pop star in an event held by KOTKIHO in Hong Kong.

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At this time she began to actively participate in IMWU activities. She even became an official in IMWU's advocacy department.

In protests against the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the WTO held in Hong Kong, she and her guitar almost became an icon because she always appeared on every stage with IMWU. She also kept on speaking out and urged people to join the rallies against the WTO during December 2005. She even became the only Indonesian woman that jumped into the water near the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre (HKCEC), the venue of the WTO meeting.

Indonesian pop star Franky Sahilatua, who was appointed as the Indonesian migrant worker's envoy, saluted her bravery. When he came to Hong Kong, Franky always contacted her.

Even if she was busy with IMWU activities, she kept on seeking new goals for her personal life.

After joining with anti-WTO marathon rallies, she took some time away from IMWU. Earlier on in 2005 she had decided to marry a man she met in her village. Her second meeting with the man, in fact, ended with her wedding day. However, she only stayed together with her new husband for six weeks before she had to go back to Hong Kong.

When she arrived in Hong Kong, she worked for a new employer, earning a wage of HK\$ 3,670 per month. She only worked for one job contract period with that employer in Sheung Wan Ho. After that, she decided to go back to her former employer in Happy Valley, and she has been working there until now.

During this time she had been searching for her true identity. Following her last homecoming, she decided to join with a religious Indonesian organization holding their meetings every Sunday in Victoria Park. She thought that this organization, named Siti Arofah, could fulfill her religious searching.

She didn't only passively join with its religious activities. She urged the organization to fight against the unfair treatment suffered by Indonesian migrant workers. "I fight against tyranny. I don't like to see oppression," she said.

Finally, this activism reconnected her with IMWU. Whenever IMWU held an event she, who wore a head scarf and Muslim dress now, always appeared with her guitar and other members of Siti Arofah. She has always been outspoken about Indonesian migrant workers rights.

"Only praying is not enough for changing our destiny. We must struggle!" She shouted to toward Indonesian migrant workers wearing head scarves who were passing by her in Victoria Park in mid-2006. This was during the time when the Coalition for Migrant Rights (CMR), a regional organization of which IMWU is a member, was holding an event and rally to protest the New Conditions of Stay (NCS) and Two Weeks Rule which discriminate against foreign domestic workers.

She yelled it after the workers refused to join with the rally on the grounds that they had come to join a religious event. "The religious event is held every week, but we can't take part in a rally against the discriminatory rules every day or every week," she said.

On May Day 2007, she also took part in the protest; she even became the coordinator on field. Her voice was thundering when she spoke through the megaphone carried all the way from Victoria Park to the Central Government Office (CGO).

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She will go home when she finishes her job contract in May 2009. She wants to run the small shop she built together with her husband near the market place in their village.

Her working abroad allowed her three brothers to study in college. Interestingly, amid all the very long days spent working as a domestic worker to make money, she still could spare time to take active part in the workers organization and to fight against unjust conditions. Though her activities often made her a target, she was still firm in her goals. Also, she firmly believes in a verse from the Koran: “Actually God won’t change the fate of people until they try to change their fate.” (Ar-Ra’ad: 11).



Indonesian women domestic workers attending advocacy training, sacrificing their rest day to gain new knowledge on how to advocate for their rights collectively at the Office of Asian Migrant Centre, Prince Edward, Hong Kong, 2007.



9. Indonesia Only on Paper

*“kami memang masih bernama indonesia berpaspor republik
tapi ketiadaan membuat kami tinggal indonesia kertas
ketiadaan menyingkirkan kami dari segala hitungan rencana negeri”*
(of course, our passports are still indonesian
but nothingness made us indonesian only on paper
nothingness exclude us from all the motherland’s plans)

THESE excerpts belong to a poem created by an Indonesian migrant worker who has been working in Hong Kong since 1992. The poem has a nervous, hopeless title: “Kami Memang Sudah Bukan Apa-apa Lagi (We Are Already Nothing Again)”. It was written on the 1st of April 2004 by the poet known as Mega Vristian.

She has written complaining, bitter poems. These are different from those poems Indonesian migrant workers prefer to create, poems of love. This woman, nicknamed Mega Everistiana Wati, chose to write poems of pain, sorrow, and ended them with complaining words.

The poem has become a hot-issue on mailing-list of Indonesian literary society. They said a poet representing the resistance of Indonesian workers has been born, just as the decade of 1990s closed, and the disappearance of Wiji Thukul, a labor poet who was kidnapped at the end of the Soeharto era.

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While Wiji Thukul wrote around the pain and struggle of industrial labor, Mega spoke about pain of Indonesian women who've been forced to work abroad as domestic workers because of poverty and limited access to education that prevents them from enjoying the "bread of wealth" in their country.

Born on the 19th of September 1964 in Subang, West Java, Mega was called Riris by her parent. She refuses to mention her complete name, as if she wants to erase some bad things from her past.

As the third of five children in her family, Riris grew up like her friends in the region. One day, she and all her siblings moved to her grandmother's house in Malang, East Java.

She didn't know why she and her siblings had to move to Malang while her father was still doing his duties as a soldier in the Indonesian Air Force at Atang Sanjaya military complex in Bogor, West Java.

In Malang, she went to Prembangan School for elementary education. Then she graduated from the ninth grade from SMPN 1 in Turen, Malang, before she studied in SMAN 5 Malang for high school.

Her high school choice was different from her two older sisters who had been studying in Jakarta and living in their relative's house.

After graduating from high school, she considered studying art because she had always been interested in art since she was in elementary school. She liked drawing, smelling the canvas and paint. But she knew her father wouldn't agree with her choice of art. At the time, people regarded the artist as a weird profession, as someone that put money as a lower priority. Meanwhile her family, as most people did then, still regarded school as the path for making money. The higher the education someone had, the more money they would get when they got a job.

She didn't have the courage to resist the mainstream, so she hid her dream about studying in an art school and applied to IKIP Negeri Malang, a college for potential teachers.

However, she couldn't bear to study in this school. In the third semester, she switched to fine arts. During her first three semesters, she often joined with art activities, such as painting and drama, or doing outdoor activities like hiking.

She then became determined to ask for her father's permission to study fine arts; but as she already guessed, her father wouldn't agree to it. Since she was angry about her father's refusal, she ran away to Jakarta. She gave up her studies.

In Jakarta, she lived in her sister's house. She often wandered around Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM), where artists gathered near the Institut Kesenian Jakarta (IKJ), an art college. She tried to apply to IKJ, but her older sister wouldn't allow her to.

Because she didn't have anyone supporting her, she took an offer from her aunt to live in Bogor and work as shopkeeper in the biggest mall in the city.

However, in her spare time, she joined with a theater group led by Eeng Saptahadi, a well-known actor. It didn't take a long time until she quit from the theater. Then she went back to Malang.

In Malang, she still refused to carry on her studies as long as father didn't allow her to study fine arts. Nevertheless, she kept taking part in art activities. She even performed in "Dalam Bayangan Tuhan" wrote by Arifin C. Noor (a well-known dramatist) in the art house of the Malang Art Council.



Amid the theater activities, she met Edi Wahyudi. He, four years younger than her, is the son of a rich family in her village. His handsome face made her fall in love. And he, in fact, enamored with her proposed to marry her.

She hadn't thought about married life at all. She was enjoying the freedom of the world with her friends. She also wanted to be a part of the art world, and she needed to build a wider network in the art society. At that time she believed that marriage was only a tiny world that would trap her into merely domestic issues.

However, she had other dreams. Having attention and affection poured onto her by Edy, she hoped he would support her obsessive dream to study fine arts. Moreover, as he is the only son of rich family, she believed he could make her dreams come true.

Without twice considering, she agreed to Edy's proposal. She doubtlessly told her parents of their wedding plans. Unexpectedly, her parents didn't give their permission. Because they were both unemployed, their families were afraid of the couple's future. They said the resources of Edy's family wouldn't be enough to support them if they both were still unemployed.

Her parents even suggested that Edy's bad behavior, like gambling, would make her sorry. But like most couples that fall in love, Riris and Edy ignored their parents' suggestions. The both had pre-marital sex in order to make her pregnant. They thought if she were pregnant, their parents would agree to their wedding.

And they were proved correct. When Riris became pregnant, their families reluctantly allowed them to be married. But their families didn't want to finance their wedding. Meanwhile, Riris' family even held a big wedding party for her oldest sister. On the grounds that Riris' wedding date was too close with her sister's ceremony, her parents didn't agree to fund Riris wedding. Edy's family also refused.

But she didn't give up. By borrowing the neighbor's wedding dress and by borrowing 10,000 rupiah from a domestic worker of the neighbor, she married Edy. At the time, she had just finished the first trimester of her pregnancy.

After the wedding, she lived in Edy's family's big house. Edy's father had passed away because he had committed suicide after he learned of his wife's love affair with another man. Meanwhile, Edy's mother decided to go off to Saudi Arabia to work as a domestic worker soon after Riris moved to the house. Edy's family's business didn't yield profits anymore, they couldn't even recoup their initial capital.

Edy and Riris survived with the money transferred by Edy's mother from Saudi Arabia. Their mother's money and the inheritances of the family was more than enough to finance the new couple's life.

Therefore, after bearing her baby, Riris asked Edy to fund her studies in fine arts – an old dream that she hoped would come true by marrying this man. But he didn't agree. He even said it was a strange demand. For him, a married woman has to absolutely obey to her husband and always stay at home. Beside that, he said a wife must not have a higher education than her husband.

Edy's reactions surprised her. She thought she had made the wrong choice, but she understood that she couldn't take back her actions. She couldn't imagine the scorn of the relatives if their marriage



ever broke up.

However, her thinking that she had made the wrong choice was strengthened as her husband began to stay away from home and spend most of his time and money gambling.

Being jobless, with an uncertain future and accused of spending Edy's inheritance, she considered finding a job abroad. When her son Bima was five years old, she decided to follow her mother-in-law's footsteps by looking for a job as a domestic worker abroad.

At the time, only a few of Indonesian women were working abroad as domestic workers. Most of them came from poor families. Therefore, some people regarded her decision to work abroad as a weird choice and taboo. Furthermore, she was still not yet 30 years old.

However, she didn't want to be subject to all this criticism. She was determined to go off, though her husband tried to stop her. The only person supporting her choice was her mother.

She went off to Hong Kong after staying at the training center of the agency Bina Mandiri, in Malang, for four months. At first, she awkwardly did the job. Being a maid was a kind of job she hadn't ever considered before. Her ego struggled. However, she had to reconcile with the bitter reality of the situation.

With wages of HK\$ 1,250 per month, although that was far below the minimum wage set by the Hong Kong government, she tried to stand the job of domestic worker. "I really started it from zero. I went into the world of a domestic worker who is obedient and speechless. I tried to eliminate my selfish ego and turned my body into a mechanical robotic domestic worker," she said.

She worked for a busy couple with one child. Her female employer was a nurse for one of the hospitals in the city and the male employer was an official with the subway system.

Gradually, Riris could do her job, such as housecleaning, cooking, and babysitting. However, the cynical acts of the male employer hurt her. He laughed at her when she said that she had studied at the university. He accused her of lying. The couple thought that all the Indonesian women working as domestic workers in Hong Kong belonged to poor families and had only graduated from elementary school.

One day, she met a domestic worker from the Philippines. From the Filipino, she learned that the employer had violated her rights as a migrant worker, from underpaying her wages to not giving her enough days off.

She began to build up her courage and eventually asked the employer about her rights as a migrant worker.

The employer's response was predictable. Rather than giving her her rights, the employer even mocked her and told her that she had accepted all these things under the contract she had signed.

She had no choices at the time, and decided to stay with the job. She didn't consider at all running away and bringing a lawsuit against the employer. The only way she protested the situation was to write about it in her diary.

Later, she had an idea to use the Internet access in the house to release her anger at the unfair situation. Whenever the couple went out, she used the Internet to meet her friends in cyber space.



While online, she would see a site named Cybersastra, a literary cyber-community for Indonesians. Here they would post their works, like poems, short stories, essays and even novels, on the web site.

She tried to sign-in to the web site. However, she didn't have the self-confidence to introduce herself as a domestic worker. Later, she found out that she could be whomever she wanted to be in cyber space. And so, she used the pen name of Mega Everistiani Wati, later she changed it to Mega Vristian. She doesn't remember why she chose that name and she has used it until now.

At first, she didn't introduce herself as a domestic worker in a foreign land. She feared that the literary community would refuse her when they learned about her true profession.

She began to post her poems on the website. Like the early creative process of Wiji Thukul, she experimented with words and styles, imitating well-known poets. It was her effort to become a part of the community.

Later, she considered uncovering her true status. "I felt guilty when I lied about my true profession as a house keeper," she said. She also ended her experiments with words and found her own style. Her eventual acknowledgement of her real profession gave her even more popularity. But she didn't change her pen name: Mega Vristian.

It was Heri Latief, an Indonesian poet living in the Netherlands, who would raise her popularity. Heri Latief's interest in her poems had elevated her name in the community. She even began to communicate with major names in the literary community, such as JJ Kusni and Sobron Aidit.

Amid this situation, she contacted her husband and offered him a divorce proposal. Her husband was already working as an electric contractor in Sukoharjo. He refused the proposal. He hoped it was not her serious offer.

Knowing the answer of her husband, she thought that he really loved her. She took pity on him, though she already felt the fading of their marriage life. She also knew that pity can't sustain a strong and health relationship.

Years later, she heard news from her sister-in-law that would confirm that her divorce proposal was the right choice. She heard that her husband was in a relationship with another woman. But, she still hoped it was only a lie. She wished her husband still really loved her. She thought that if they split, it would be their decision together, not caused by a third person.

Trying to confirm what was really happening, she called her husband in Sukoharjo. But it was true. His friends in Sukoharjo confirmed the news. Worse, her husband even acknowledged it.

The divorce was not avoidable. She couldn't accept that Edy and his mistress had been enjoying all the money she transferred and a house she built in Malang. They both even had a child together.

After the divorce from Edy, she kept on with her life. She became even more involved in the literary society and tried to build a literary community among migrant workers. She tried to manage a mailing list for them, lists such as Sastra TKI and Apresiasi Sastra, to accommodate the aspirations of migrant workers and others.

She also actively wrote short stories and news reports, sent them to the mass media for migrant workers in Hong Kong. She has even become a permanent contributor to several media outlets.

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Although she only has limited funds, she was determined to do start a publishing business. So, she built Dragon Family Publisher.

In July 2006, Dragon Family Publisher released their first book, “Nyanyian Imigran”, a collection of migrant worker’s short stories. In Indonesia the book was launched at the library HB Jassin in Taman Ismail Marzuki, Jakarta. She didn’t travel to the Jakarta launching, but a number of Indonesian migrant workers who wrote in the book attended and the event attracted significant attention.

Interestingly, beside literary activities, she has actively been participating in the migrant workers union. She never missed the union activities, from discussions to rallies.

During the rallies against the WTO in Hong Kong held during the Sixth Ministerial Meeting of the WTO in December 2005, she also joined the rallies, holding the “art of struggle” show.

She has often contributed her artistic talents when the union held rallies or demonstrations. She has often created unique and fascinating art for the events.

She regards the art life and the struggle for workers as inseparable, as two-sides of the same coin. So, she always used every chance she got to explore her two passions.

The migrant worker’s shelter run by the Indonesia Coalition of Migrant Workers Organizations (KOTKIHO) is one of her experiments. At the shelter, she created a wall-magazine. She encouraged the Indonesian migrant workers staying there while they seek resolution of their problems, to turn their feelings into poems, short stories, paintings, prayers, or letters. She hoped these activities could ease their burden, and could possibly even create a writer.

She also urged the migrant workers community to care about their rights and to speak up about their suffering. She even suggested that they join the organizations advocating for their labor rights.

Interestingly, it was not only her fellow migrant workers she convinced, but also her employer’s children who were in elementary and high school. She often brought them along to rallies. She also taught them poetry. She has looked after them for many years; she saw them for first time when she signed her third contract. Her relationship with the children was so close that the employer decided to end the job contract. “The employers asked me to quit because they wanted to have closer relationship with their children,” she said.

The decision, in fact, didn’t really separate her from their children. Sometimes the children deliberately waited for her near the house of her new employer. They stood there for hours, just to see her. However, she had already promised to their mother that she would break the emotional ties. So, they could only say hello or talk for a few minutes.

Her son, Bima, has grown up and graduated from high school. He will go off to university. They have built a close, intimate mother and son relationship. Bima has even tried to write poetry, following in her footsteps.

She doesn’t know when she can go home. A man, widower with four children living in the United States, has trapped her in love. The both plan to be married, but they haven’t set the wedding date yet. “I want to be the mother of his children,” she said, briefly.

However, she doesn’t want to experience the same old bitter story as with her first husband. For her, the bad days that she has had are already enough.

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She has already been forced to become a domestic worker to find herself and her identity. She has already refused to be someone else. So, if she goes home, still she will be herself. She will keep on giving her energy to the oppressed, join with “veteran” migrant workers and their families who share the commitment to make working conditions abroad better. The poem “Perempuan Puteri Bumi” below, she wrote on the 4th of April 2004, and mentions these commitments.

*aku anakmu perempuan memang
terpaksa membabu
terpaksa mengembara
daripada hilang diri
daripada kehilangan keperempuanan
dan jadi kesed lelaki yang kutolak keras
aku perempuan Indonesia
perempuan hari ini
perempuan warga bumi
yang sanggup menampik
dukaku
lukaku
adalah duka dan lukaku sendiri
tak kubagi kepadamu
duka dan luka
yang tak lagi bisa dihitung cipoa*

*aku bukan kau tanah air
bukan perempuan masa lalu
yang diam pasif menunggu*

*aku,
perempuan pelaga
penarung penakluk hari dan kelam
yang sanggup menampik tantangan
juga hinaan lelaki”*

i am, of course, your daughter
being forced to be a domestic worker
to wander around
rather being nothingness
rather missing her womanhood
and only to be a doormat for a man’s foot that I strongly refused

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i am an Indonesian woman
a woman of the day
a woman of earth people
who can refuse
my sorrows
my pains
are sorrows and wounds of mine
i don't want to share them with you
sorrow and pain
that can't be calculated by cipoa

i am not you, motherland
not a woman from the past
who is passively and quietly waiting for

i,
a fighting woman
conqueror of days and dark
who can fight against challenges
also indignities by man



10. The Pioneer

THE white faced mixed-race woman stretched the ends of her lips, whispering hateful words about the other woman passing through the corridor of the hospital.

“Never trust her! She seems to be a kind person, but she is an evil one. She often deceives female migrant workers. Pretending to help those who are bringing a lawsuit, but after the decree she takes the money from the suit,” the woman said with a grumbling tone, sticking out her mouth at the woman passing by.

However, someone else she talked with knew the woman walking by better. She also understood the process of bringing a lawsuit for Indonesian migrant workers with problems with their employers. So, she wasn’t influenced by the white-faced woman working as recruitment agent recruiting Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong.

This wasn’t the first time such hateful words were directed towards Sumiati, a woman who was the subject of the insults from the employment agency agent. Sumiati, Mia is her nickname, had often faced such hostile acts because of her advocacy for Indonesian migrant workers. Not only have agencies often been angry with her activities, but also officials from the Indonesian consulate in Hong Kong.

Instead being afraid of all the threats, Mia even berated those preventing her from advocating for migrant workers.

Indonesian migrant workers ambassador and pop star, Franky Sahilatua, even admired Mia’s firm and defiant acts when she negotiated with the Indonesian consulate. “The community of migrant workers needs such figure. Firm and never surrenders,” he said.



Among Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong, her name is popular. She intensively advocates for them. But a long time before she had become well known among the workers, she also had to go through the winding, uneasy years of her childhood, adolescence and journey to migrant work.

Born on the 13th of October 1960 in Pacitan City, East Java, Mia has never met her father. Her father had gone off to Palembang, South Sumatra, soon after she was born. “He divorced my mother when I was in 40 days old,” she recalled.

Mia is the youngest of four children, but her second sister has died. After he father went away, her mother worked as cow dealer. Later she married a widower with four children.

When Mia was in elementary school, her mother left her and went to Selat Panjang, Medan, bringing along her three sisters.

Mia lived in Pacitan with her stepfather, her four stepbrothers, and her grandmother. She didn’t know if mother and stepfather had divorced. The only parent she closely knew was her stepfather.

In Pacitan, she enjoyed her childhood like the other kids. One of the memories she remembered well was the situation following the coup on the 30th of September 1965. This incident greatly impacted her village. She remembered that teachers of her elementary school were chased by a number of unknown men until they hid in the woods. One of her relatives was stripped down to the skin and thrown into a big hole. Fortunately they didn’t shoot him, and he could escape.

Besides the bad memories, she remembers her puppy love when she was in the fourth grade. She also remembers how angry she was when she saw a friend copying her answers during a test and was promoted while she wasn’t.

Graduating from elementary school, her grandma tried to engage Mia with a man of grandma’s choice. At the time, it was common for girls who’ve just had their first period to be married. But Mia refused it. Not because she thought that she was too young to be married, but she didn’t like the match. She didn’t love the man grandma chose. She already loved an older schoolmate who often went with her to the mosque.

Becoming angry at her grandmother’s act, Mia bravely left and went to Jakarta. She was following the suggestion of an employment broker who is the brother of the chief of her village.

In Jakarta, she worked as a shopkeeper in the Setia Budi neighborhood. She rented a room for 6,000 rupiah a month. Her wages were 15,000 rupiah per month which later rose up to 20,000 rupiah per month.

In her boarding house, she made friends with various people, including students. Here, for the first time, she took part in a wave of rallies in Jakarta in 1974. Later, these rallies were known as the Malari (Malapetaka Lima Belas Januari) incident.

In the 1977 elections, she was able to vote for the first time. In this election, and for the next two next elections, she supported the Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (PDI, Indonesian Democratic Party). During the Soeharto era, this was a courageous choice to support a party other than his ruling party Golkar. However, Mia has never followed the mainstream. She even actively joined with PDI campaigns in Jakarta. “I supported PDI because I admired Soekarno. I had heard his story since I was child,” she said.

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In 1978, there was a babysitting course in Jakarta. She decided to take it. Interestingly, all the participants would be employed after they finished the course. So, starting in 1978, she became a nurse in a maternity hospital in the Tebet neighborhood of Jakarta.

Mia got lucky and her bad days ended in 1982 as rich woman bore a child at the hospital. The woman liked her, asked the hospital management to allow her hire Mia as a babysitter. The hospital didn't mind, and so Mia moved in with the rich woman. She earned 75,000 rupiah per month; which was a very high wage at the time. She stayed there for around six years until she decided to leave and work in Hong Kong in 1989.

Mia said that she never had trouble while working for the rich family. They were kind people. They gave her what she needed. However, her daily life was boring. She thought the job was too easy and gave her no challenge in her life.

Meanwhile she had experienced uncertain, winding love stories. The first lover she met in 1974. They split after two years together because his parents refused to accept her. They said Mia came from "bad seed" because her parents had an unclear background.

The second boyfriend she met in the 1980s. He paid for her courses and finally left her to marry a girl whom he made pregnant; after she had already planned their wedding and tried to build them a house.

Even though all her plans fell apart, Mia was very resolute, still attending his wedding ceremony. "I showed him that I didn't cry, though after attending the wedding I fainted from sorrow," she recalled with a bitter smile.

After this and until now, she has been determined to continue her life without a man. Her yearning for her father and her two failed love stories blocked her heart from men.

However, amid her loneliness in Jakarta, she found a family where she could express her affections; to do the things she wished she could do, but were impossible, with her own family.

This happened after she met a young man at an event of a well known Jakarta radio station's fan club. She was sympathetic towards him after she learned that he couldn't continue his high school education for lack of money. She offered to finance his study. After which they had a close relationship, like brother and sister.

She also helped him find job after he graduated from high school, and she even funded his wedding. She is also close to all his relatives. They called her their oldest sister. They always asked her advice when they would need to make a decision. Until now, she has still maintained a good relationship with the family. She always transferred part of her wages to the family, funding their household and financing the education of the children and grandchildren of the family. Through all this she still remembered her siblings in Medan and her half-sisters in Pacitan.

Her mother died in 1985 when Mia lived in Jakarta. She remembered that she flew to Medan from Jakarta when she heard the bad news. It was her first and last flight until four years later when she boarded the plane to depart for Hong Kong.

Before her departure to Hong Kong she thanked her old employers. They knew that their relatives

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in Hong Kong needed a domestic worker, so they suggested that she take the job. At that time, an Indonesian could get a domestic worker job in Hong Kong with no recruitment agency interventions.

The old employer actually wanted her to continue to work for them in Jakarta. They even were willing to raise her wages to match or surpass what she would make in Hong Kong. But she was firmly determined to go off. She felt she would have to endure a monotonous life if she continued to stay in Jakarta. She needed a new experience.

In 1989, she went to Hong Kong, working for the old employer's relatives. She earned HK\$ 1,000 per month. She stayed there for two years until she moved to a new employer in 1991. With the new employer, she worked for 15 years. Her salary rose to HK\$ 5,000 a month before it was decreased to HK\$ 4,000 because of the economic crisis.

Interestingly, in Hong Kong, she didn't only make money but also actively took part in the building of Indonesian migrant worker's organizations. The organizations she helped to establish are Majelis Taklim (religious gathering), Sanggar Budaya (art and cultural house), and Asosiasi Masyarakat dan Mantan Nakerwan Indonesia Hong Kong (Amanah - association of community and ex-Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong)

However, she believed that these organizations couldn't accommodate her aspirations. Her interest in social-political issues encouraged her to build another organization; at that time, she didn't know there already was the Indonesian Group advocating for Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong.

With her friends, she founded Barisan Srikandi after Amien Rais, the leader of Muhammadiyah, arrived in Hong Kong prior to the election of 1999. Amien Rais was also the leader of Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN) and in 2004 he ran for presidential office with Siswono Yudhohusodo as his vice presidential candidate.

She and her friends invited Amien Rais to Hong Kong. An organization of Indonesian-Chinese people named the Hong Kong Society for Indonesian Studies (HKSIS) supported this event.

They held two meetings with Amien Rais in Hong Kong. One event was held in the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center (HKCEC) and another was held in the HKSIS office. She said, around 500 people – mostly Indonesian migrant workers – came to the meeting in HKCEC, while 300 people attended the gathering in HKSIS. They also invited officials from the Indonesian consulate to the meetings.

Since then, her name has been well-known by Indonesian workers, officials of the Indonesian consulate, and Jakarta politicians.

But this was not the end of her activities. After the first Amien Rais meeting, she stayed in touch with PAN. Ahead of the election of 1999, PAN even sent her the party's shirts and flags. She bravely campaigned alone in Victoria Park.

Her militancy encouraged PAN to build a party branch in Hong Kong and to appoint her as the leader of the branch. However, she didn't lead it because she was aware of her limits as a domestic worker. Therefore, she founded Barisan Srikandi which was affiliated with PAN. The group finally dispersed and its members moved to other organizations, such as Majelis Taklim, Sanggar Budaya, Amanah, and the Indonesian Group.

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In 2001, an umbrella group of Indonesian migrant worker's organizations in Hong Kong was created, it was the Koalisi Tenaga Kerja Indonesia di Hong Kong (KOTKIHO). Amanah was one of its members and it also included the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) which had grown out of the now defunct Indonesian Group, Sanggar Budaya, Majelis Taklim, Forum Komunikasi Mukminat Peduli Umat (FKMPU), Persatuan Dakwah Victoria (PDV) and the Yogya International Club (YIC) were also all members.

She was very popular and she was elected to lead Kotkiho. She ran KOTKIHO's advocacy programs with uncompromising ways. She didn't care who she had to face. She would carry on a strong, bitter fight whenever she thought it was the necessary thing to do.

As the leader of KOTKIHO, she attended a number of regional meetings because the group is part of Coalition for Migrants Rights (CMR). She has even gone to Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines for the regional meetings.

In late February 2007, she went off for first time to Africa, attending Nyeleni 2007 – a meeting on agricultural issues held in Mali.

Earlier she imagined that she would see a beautiful country, like she has seen in brochures of Africa. She even agreed to buy her friends some unique souvenirs from Africa. She was imagining the joys of traveling.

She was wrong. She had to spend 19 hours on the plane and then three more hours traveling by bus to reach the meeting spot.

"I have never flown like that. From Hong Kong to Bangkok (Thailand), I spent three hours on the plane. Then from Bangkok to Nairobi (Kenya), it took nine hours, then from Nairobi to Bamako (Mali) as long as seven hours. After that, we had to travel by bus for three hours to Selingue," she said.

Interestingly, there were no hotels or motels where they were to stay. In temperatures around 34-39 degrees Celsius, delegations from five continents were forced to sleep in tents where at any time hot winds would blow in sand, sticking to their sweaty skin.

Besides that, the food provided for the meeting was not comfortable for an Asian. "It was like a porridge of soybeans," she said.

For the "bad food", she and other participants had to endure a very long line. Many of them did not even get any because the food was gone before they could reach the front of the line, and they had to wait for the next time.

However, in the Mali meeting, she learned a lot. She learned that the fight against injustice must not be done alone. Worker's struggles have to run with wider solidarity and on an international scale. To reach this goal, she doesn't care if she has to face a war of words with recruitment agencies and decision-makers. She doesn't want to stop what she has already started.



Ms. Sartiwen, one of the migrants union leaders in Hong Kong, leading numbers during a rally and march to demand the government stop underpayment practises and excessive agency fees.



11. The Bravery Composer

SHE appeared on Hong Kong television. Interviewed by a reporter amid hundreds demonstrators demanding that the minimum wage for local and migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong be enforced.

She spoke calmly, not in a furious tone. She didn't have a talent for good, fluent oration. However, she sent a clear message; she demanded that the Hong Kong government respect the rights of migrant domestic workers.

Her name is Sartiwen, just call her Sarti. Her face was well known by Indonesian migrant workers because she often appeared in newspapers, on television, and even a Singapore magazine had a profile of her in their December 2006 issue. However, because of her low-profile attitude many people didn't know that this woman born on the 27th of January 1974 in Banyumas, Central Java, led the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) – the only Indonesian union legally accepted by Hong Kong authorities.

In the union, she led 2,500 members who understood their rights. She knew the members of the Hong Kong parliament who cared about the migrant workers. And she always received special invitations for Hong Kong government events. Ironically, Indonesian officials in Hong Kong only gave IMWU one of their eyes because the union always directed strong criticism towards Indonesian government policies violating the rights of migrant workers.

It was an accident that triggered Sarti's desire to join with a worker's organization. In April 1999, there was a Kartini Day event in Victoria Park, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong that attracted her attention. She had just worked for a few months at her new employer after her first employer broke the job contract where she had been working since June 1998 because of their bankruptcy.

On that Kartini Day, she met Nursafiah – her old neighbor from Indonesia – for the first time in ten

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years. Because of Nursafiah, Sarti learned about the Indonesian Group – a group of several Indonesian women who routinely discussed migrant worker's problems. Sarti began to regularly attend their meetings. She learned that she might be able to refuse the agency fee payment of HK\$ 21,000 that she had to pay.

"When I learned about this, I immediately stopped paying the fee; at that time, I had already paid HK\$ 17,000," she said. Like other Indonesian migrant workers, she had been forced to pay this agency fee to compensate them for her departure to Hong Kong. Then the agency then deducted her wages for seven months. But when she learned that this policy violated Hong Kong laws and the rights of migrant workers, she stopped paying.

She said the agency was not able to do anything when they found out that Sarti had joined with an organization advocating for the rights of migrant workers.

Her activities in the Indonesian Group went on until members of the group asked her to sign a form to register the group as the first Indonesian union in Hong Kong. "The form needed seven signatories, the other members were not off that day. So they asked me to sign it," she said.

Therefore, she became one of founders of the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU), the union registered by the Indonesian Group with the Hong Kong government.

The union was started and continues to operate to this day. Its leaders came and went. It faced some problems and then resolved them, from personal conflicts to financial issues, just like any other organization.

During one of the crises, she appeared. At a special meeting of the union, they handed her a mandate to lead the union.

She recalled that those were hard times. She had to rebuild the union that had almost been crushed by the distrust of the rank-and-file members. She admits that she is not brilliant. However, her patience and her modesty gradually united the members and eliminated the hostilities among them. Acknowledging her hard work, they chose her to lead the union for a second term.

Under her leadership, IMWU became more popular, even outside of Hong Kong. The union has received a lot of invitations from international events.

The 36th Meeting of United Nations (UN) CEDAW held in New York on August 2006, for example, invited an IMWU delegation. Unfortunately, Sarti was not able to attend. Then general secretary of IMWU Eni Yuniarti who is also a domestic worker went to New York for the meeting. Sitting together with delegations from the Hong Kong government and parliament as well as non-government organizations, Eni spoke of the problems of Indonesian migrant workers living in Hong Kong.

"There were a lot of invitations to international events for IMWU. Unfortunately, I must get permission long before they happen if I want to attend them," she said.

Her job as a domestic worker sometimes gives her problems. But she has never given up. In November 2006, she went to Amsterdam, attending a conference to build an international alliance of Indonesian migrant worker's organizations. She spoke to the world about migrant worker's working and living conditions.

Her bravery and patience came from the difficult experiences of her life. As the oldest of four

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children, and the only daughter in her family, she has been faced with a lot of challenges. Moreover, she came from a poor farmer family in Karang Salam Village, Kemranjen District, Banyumas (Central Java).

She had a hard time trying to complete elementary school. Because of poverty and hunger, she was often ill since she never had proper nutrition. As a result, it took her nine years to finish the first six grades and elementary school. However, undeterred she continued on until she graduated from junior high school and ninth grade. After that, she gave up, refusing to apply to high school.

Seeing the poverty that was trapping her family, she chose to get job and abandoned her dreams of higher education.

So, two days after graduating from ninth grade, she tried her luck by applying to an employment agency in Pasar Minggu, South Jakarta.

Her leaving for Jakarta was an uneasy step. Her parents had to sell their big wooden kitchen house to pay the broker to bring her to Jakarta. She remembered that her parents only got 100,000 rupiah for the kitchen house, whereas the brokerage fee was 200,000 rupiah.

And then the broker asked Sarti and her parents to pay an extra fee of 300,000 rupiah when the family has the money later, and of course the broker had already taken the 100,000 rupiah. Her parents weren't able to do anything, but accepted the terms. They also promised to pay off the extra fee in the future. They hoped Sarti could immediately get a job abroad.

She finally went off to the shelter of the agency Duta Wibawa in South Jakarta. Besides being encouraged to work abroad by the poverty wrapping her family, she was angry at her mother for becoming pregnant again and forcing Sarti to look for a job abroad. She was angry because her mother was pregnant when they were already drowning in dead-end poverty.

She knew later that the pregnancy was out of her mother's control. That the contraception, in fact, didn't work. But, at that time, her anger had blinded her from common sense. She left the house when her mother was in an advanced stage of pregnancy.

After staying for several months at the agency's training center, she went to Singapore. It was the first foreign land she had ever seen. She arrived in the country on the 1st of October 1992.

Arriving at Changi airport in Singapore with three other Indonesian migrant workers, she was not picked up by the agency. She and the three workers drifted into an uncertain situation at the airport. Their airline even lost her baggage. They stayed at the airport until the following morning; they didn't know where they had to go. Without money and all of their belongings, they had to bear with their hunger and fear.

The agency didn't arrive to pick them up until noon, the day after they arrived, moving them to the agency's shelter. That night, the employer came and brought Sarti to their house.

Working and living with a family that was speaking in a foreign language was hard and made her uneasy. Moreover, Sarti had never received any training when she was staying in the agency training camp in Jakarta. She also never got one English lesson. Worse, she didn't like English when she was studying in junior high school. Therefore, she was forced to use sign language to communicate with the

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employer.

The language issue often made her employer angry. She remembered that during the first months she worked at that house, the employer often fiercely berated her.

Fortunately, their child liked her. The kindergarten age child taught her how to speak in English. In return, the kid asked her to teach her the Indonesian language.

The employer gradually turned into a kindly person. Sarti stayed with this job until 1998. Her brief period learning English was useful, and thanks to it she found an advertisement for a domestic worker job in Hong Kong. She wanted to apply to the job.

Before her contract was over, she applied to the Hong Kong job. Her employer didn't know about it, but their child found her application. The kid tried to prevent her from leaving the house. But she insisted. She wanted to have a new experience in another foreign land.

After finding out about her plan, the employer reluctantly let her go. They actually wanted to extend her contract, but they couldn't stop Sarti's plan.

Paying HK\$ 600, Sarti was firmly decided to move to Hong Kong. Originally, she hoped that she could go directly to Hong Kong from Singapore, she didn't want to return to Indonesia. But she couldn't do it. She finally returned to Indonesia in April 1998. At her family's house, she saw her youngest brother for the first time; her mother gave birth to the youngest child when Sarti was working in Singapore. Time had erased her anger with her mother. She became determined to finance her sibling's education.

After staying at home for six weeks, she finally went off to Hong Kong after receiving her new visa. The agency asked her to pay HK\$ 21,000 by paying them HK\$ 3,000 installments for first seven months of working.

The agency cut her wage of HK\$ 3,860 for the installments. At that time, Sarti didn't take her once every two weeks day off, so she could earn HK\$ 4,000 a month. Every month she handed HK\$ 3,000 to the agency and kept HKD 1000 for herself and her family.

But she only had that job for four months, the employer was bankrupt and couldn't pay her anymore.

After the first job ended, the agency sent her to the new employer; in return, she had to keep paying the rest of the installments. Later, she decided to stop paying the installments after members of the Indonesian Group told her that she didn't need to pay it. But she had already paid up to HK\$ 17,000 to the agency.

With the second employer, Sarti was able to finish her contract. After the contract was over, she looked for a new employer using the internet. She wanted to work for a European family, on the grounds of improving her English. So, she began to browse the internet searching for a new employer.

A German family in Hong Kong was interested in hiring Sarti as domestic worker. But they couldn't directly employ her before they dealt with the agency. Sarti tried to go around the agency by contacting Indonesian consulate, but officials at the consulate told her to deal with the agency. Even though the agency did nothing and had no role in her finding the new employer, they asked her potential employer to pay them HK\$ 8,000.



Sarti wasn't able to do anything. She did not want to tell the potential employer to pay this. She proposed to the agency that she would give the agency HK\$ 5,000 and the potential employer might have to pay the rest. But the employer refused. They said they preferred to give her the money rather than paying it to the agency who had no role in the recruitment. They hated the agency for unfairly taking advantage of that situation. Because of the agency's actions, Sarti wasn't able to work for the German family.

However, she didn't give up. In early January 2001, she got a contract with her third employer. She has worked there until now.

"My current employers are good people. Though they give me days off only twice a month, I trade off the holidays for more money," she said.

Sarti has not been able to take one day off each week because her employer has a young child she has to look after. "The employer asked me to be patient, promising to give me one day off each week when their kid has grown up," she added.

Having limited days off, she often missed lot of the chances to meet her friends from the union. This situation has made her feel guilty. While she isn't a leader of IMWU anymore, many members of the union like to consult with her. However, she hates to protest to her employer about the lack of holidays because they treat her kindly. She always restrains from hurting anyone, include her employer.

This "soft attitude" often influenced her activities in the union. Some members and officials were often annoyed by her soft-ways. But it seemed that Sarti was always able to empower her friends and was able to listen to their complaints and fears. Using her soft ways, she has made her friends stronger all while respecting them as the human beings they are.



Victoria Park, Hong Kong ~ where the Indonesian domestic workers love to hang out during their rest day.



12. The Dream Weaver

THE cafe sat on Margonda street, the street that connected the cities of Jakarta and Depok. It has a unique, interesting interior and provides a comfortable mood. If you come to the cafe before dark, you will see few people there.

She quietly sat on one of the chairs, ordering a bowl of soup and a glass of lemon tea. She was waiting for someone. Five boxes of cigarettes were kept within her bag. She brought them from Macau for the person she has been waiting for.

When her soup session was over, the man she waited for came in with his younger friend.

The man decided to move to another table, saying he wants to talk with her in a more comfortable atmosphere. She agreed, she was impatient to chat with him. For her, the cigarettes were only a way to meet him.

The man is a well known Indonesian poet. His name has often been quoted by the mass media. His poem collections have become a hot issue among the literary society, at the national and international levels. Also, he had a publishing company.

Meanwhile she is only an ex-domestic worker who met the man when she worked in Hong Kong. Of course, she was not a domestic worker when she met him in the cafe. She is also a writer. Sometimes she wrote poems or short stories. Her name was popular, though mostly among Indonesian migrant workers who work as domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Her friends called her Lik Kismawati. So, she used that name when she saw him at a meeting of the migrant worker's union.

She was charmed with his knowledge and art insights. She wanted to learn a lot from him. She wanted to become a good writer.



She hoped the conversation in the cafe would inspire her, she had decided to return home in July 2006 and to end her time as a migrant worker.

But she didn't get the inspiration she wished for. He even talked about his other businesses, a small restaurant, a small telecommunication shop, and selling *peyek* (a crisp, thin cracker made from flour and peanuts, shrimp or small fish).

Her eyes looked more and more depressed. Her enthusiasm was fading away. But he didn't see it, neither did his friend. He kept on telling her that writing is a hard job and that Jakarta is not a friendly city. He suggested to Lik that she should return to Hong Kong and once again work as a domestic worker abroad. Her heart was broken at once, but she kept the disappointment to herself.

Being a writer was a dream she had since she lived in Hong Kong. She knitted the dream together as painstakingly as a weaver, slowly and patiently. She underwent all the necessary phases, just like a beginner has to.

When she arrived in Hong Kong in November 1999, Lik was only a woman who wanted to earn money from working as a domestic worker. She had to do that job, as her family was trapped in poverty. It was the classic story representing the same reason so many Indonesian women leave Indonesia to be domestic workers abroad.

Lik's father was only a laborer. One day the factory suddenly fired him. He then tried to do menial jobs at construction projects. But it was not enough to support his family. Furthermore, the Asian financial crisis had stopped many of the construction projects.

As the oldest of four children, Lik saw the poverty that wrapped her family since she was child. "I always couldn't pay the school fees. Every examination time, I had to meet the guidance counselor for dispensation," she said. She had to do that because she didn't pay the fee yet.

Because of the poverty, she could not finish high school. She dropped out before she graduated.

When she was 18 years old, she was determined to ease her parent's burden by becoming a domestic worker abroad. She chose the same way that her neighbors have used to escape poverty. Television and newspaper have often reported stories of abuse against migrant workers. Many people said, going abroad is an act that welcomes death. But Lik didn't care. She wanted her siblings to go on with their studies, not to drop out like she did. She wanted also to get out of the poverty that made her mother cry and caused her family to be mocked by others.

In Hong Kong, Lik worked for six years and six months. Her first contract's stating wage was HK\$ 2,000 per month. It was far below the minimum wage in Hong Kong. Lik never complained about her underpayment. She didn't know anything yet and she thought it was the proper wage for a new domestic worker as she was.

But at her next employer, a Japanese family who hired her in late 2001, she received the proper wage. She also had enough free time because there were not a lot of tasks that she had to do at the employer's home. The employer also allowed her to go out after she finished her daily tasks.

Then she met people in the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU), an organization advocating for Indonesian workers in Hong Kong. A number of the courses and training being offered

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by IMWU attracted her attention. Though she dropped out of high school, she still is very interested in acquiring new knowledge.

Interestingly, the IMWU activities started her along the creative process of writing, and her name began to appear among those of the literary migrant workers community.

She started as an intern for IMWU's publication, *Kabar*, which was her start as a writer. *Kabar* itself functioned as a medium to spread the awareness of unionism and to educate of migrant workers about their rights. Though it has few funds, *Kabar* became an effective propaganda tool for the union. Besides writing and editing articles, Lik also learned how to set and lay out the publication. She did the work happily.

Lik admits, the union has taught her a lot, from political issues to how to work as a team and to learn how to be confident. Gradually, her self-confidence has grown since she joined the union. She has even attended meetings of migrant worker's organizations in Hong Kong and an international conference in Korea.

Also, her new self-confidence encouraged her to build a Komunitas Perantau Nusantara (Kopernus) in 2004. It is a writer's community for Indonesian migrant workers. From the community, a number of migrant worker writers were born and have established a strong existence at the Indonesian-language-based media in Hong Kong.

Lik soon tried to send her work to the media. She remembers the first article she had published in the media was the story of Tulkiyem. The story then became a permanent column in the newspaper *Suara Hong Kong*.

The Tulkiyem series talks about the light, humorous stories of the life of Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong. With Etik Juwita, Lik is one of the writers who frequently contributes the stories. The Tulkiyem series has many readers waiting for each new edition of *Suara*. Therefore, even though Lik has returned to her village in Sidoarjo (East Java) she still sends articles for the column.

Then, she was runner-up and won other prizes in a contest for short story writing held by the Forum Lingkar Pena (FLP) in 2005.

Through the years, her short stories were often published by Indonesian national newspapers, such as *Sinar Harapan Surya*.

Several of her short stories were also collected and printed in a number of anthologies, for example "Selasar Kenangan" an anthology published by Akoer and Apresiasi Sastra in June 2006 and "Nyanyian Imigran" an anthology published by Dragon Family Publisher that same year.

She even spoke at the launching of "Nyanyian Imigran" at Pusat Dokumentasi HB Jassin in Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM), Jakarta, in July 2006. She spent extra energy to write her short story titled "Laki-laki dan Lukisan Burung" which was then included in the collection "Nyanyian Imigran". She was glad to receive so much appreciation for the story.

When she decided to go home to Indonesia in 2006, Lik had a dream to work totally in writing. She didn't want to be a domestic worker anymore.

But, in fact, it was not easy to realize the dream. "After going home, I had to restart everything



from zero,” she said.

Her hopes to get a proper job through her relationship with the well-known poet faded away. They all underestimated her. With only the diploma of a ninth grade graduate, it was hard for her to find a job even though she had experience working abroad for more than six years. A number of vacancies she found through newspaper ads were only an attempt to hire salespeople at a low wage.

Meanwhile, her idea to open a small shop in her village in Krian District, Sidoarjo, was hard to realize because the money she earned had been lent to relatives and she couldn’t be sure when they would pay it back.

For the first few months after Lik returned to Indonesia she still had a strong spirit and desire to improve her writing skills. She often sent her articles to *Suarain* Hong Kong. But, because of a lack of facilities and of friends to discuss the issues with, she had difficulty coming up with new ideas.

“I had to ride a motorcycle for several kilometers from my house to find Internet access,” she said. Lik had culture shock after she returned home. The easily reached facilities in Hong Kong were expensive things in Indonesia.

She then decided to take the examination for “program paket C” in order to get her high school certificate. After that, she planned to go off to university. “I want to get a higher education because I want to work at a better level. If I am a university graduate, I will have better chances to find job,” she said.

While she waited for the chance, she worked in a wood-processing factory in Sidoarjo. She worked from morning till night, earning a wage of 800,000 rupiah per month. It was far below the wage she earned in Hong Kong. But she knew she had to work to make money to support her family. As the oldest and the only daughter of the family, she has been the mainstay for them. Her three siblings, father and mother always asked her opinion when they needed to make a decision.

In this complicated situation, marriage has never crossed her mind, though she was already 26 years old. The neighbors and relatives have often questioned her single status, but she doesn’t care. She puts the responsibility to support her family as her highest priority.

It has even crossed her mind to go back to Hong Kong and work again as a domestic worker. But she immediately ruled out those ideas. She wants to endure in her motherland.

In mid-2007, she received an offer from a well-known writer to collect her short stories and have them printed by a big publishing company in Jakarta. However, she doesn’t want to pin her hopes on it. She doesn’t want to be hurt when her dreams are scattered again. She wants to be realistic.



13. On Solidarity

THE old man hugged his wife. They both were crying in the living room of their house. They couldn't pay their debts that totaled more than 36 million rupiah. They were afraid of losing their house and all of their things. They hated that they couldn't afford to have their five children go on with their education, without which they will suffer from an uncertain, hard life.

This scene happened around 10 years ago, but Dina Nuriyati still clearly remembers it. The couple crying in the living room are her parents. She saw them through her bedroom door. She was depressed. She wanted the scene to be over, but she didn't know what to do.

At that time, Dina was in senior high school in Kepanjen, Malang. She is the third of five children. She dreamed of enjoying higher education after graduating from high school. However, the scene in living room scattered her dreams.

Her two elder sisters had to stop their studies in college because her parents' business failed and they had serious debts at a private bank. Dina also had to rule out her dreams. Tears dropped from her eyes when her parents said they were sorry and couldn't finance her higher education. "I was so sad but I could understand their situation," she recalled.

Now, Dina is a staff program officer at Fiedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and she lives in Aceh. She has become a tough woman who tirelessly campaigns for political awareness and the importance of worker's unions. She also worked with the Trade Union Care Centre (TUCC) and taken part in drafting qanun, a regional law in Aceh, about Indonesian migrant workers.

But a long time before this, Dina was a woman who was forced to leave her village because of the economic hardships her family faced. She, like millions of other Indonesian women, had to search for



bread crumbs fallen from the tables of a foreign land, working as a domestic worker abroad.

Born on the 25th of July 1973 in Plaosan Village, Wonosari District, Malang, Dina still remembers her joyful childhood. She grew up in a rather wealthy family.

Besides farming, her father earned additional money as a minibus public transportation driver. The minibus had always attracted lots of passengers because it was an important transportation link between her village sitting on the slope of Kawi Mountain with the city of Malang. At that time, not many people had a private car, so a public minibus driver could earn a lot of money.

Meanwhile, her mother ran a rice mill business in the village, adding more income for the family. It was no wonder that they could provide not just enough food and clothes for their children, but also her parents were able to fund their education. Her parents even adopted and financed a cousin's schooling. "My father and my mother wanted us to study. They didn't want us to drop out of school like them. My mother only passed elementary school, sixth grade, but my father didn't even finish elementary school," she said.

But life doesn't follow a straight line. When she was in ninth grade, Dina began see that the economics of her family's household were unstable. Her parents had a financial crisis. The crisis was even worse when she was in high school. She remembered feeling embarrassed when her teacher asked her to explain why she paid the school fee late.

Later father told her that the earnings from the harvest of their farm was less than the cost of the cultivation; they still owed money, with very high interest, to a private bank for the farm. Meanwhile, his income from driving the minibus could no longer be relied on to support their needs.

Dina was reminded that the situation was very bad when debt collectors visited their home, which they did often. She often met the debt collectors as father avoided from them because he didn't have money to pay the installments.

The bank then threatened to seize their house. This added to the burden of her parents; and one day she saw them both crying and hugging in the living room.

So, after graduating from high school, Dina put away her dreams of going off to university. Her two elder sisters also terminated their studies before they received their bachelor degrees. They decided to get jobs to support the near economic collapse of the household.

Her life changed accidentally. She was ironing clothes when she heard the news on the radio of an electronic factory in Malaysia with vacancies. At once, she thought it was the only way for her to ease the economic burden of the household and to allow her dreams of studying in the university to come true.

Hoping to earn a lot of money while only relying on a high school diploma was an impossible dream. Even so, her parents needed a lot of money to pay off their debts.

She became firmly determined to go abroad. While there was a stigma against going abroad, that most women going abroad were becoming prostitutes, Dina didn't care. At that time, not many women from the village were working abroad.

Brave Women



Without the consent of her parents, Dina visited the company that was recruiting people to work in Malaysia like she heard from the radio. She met the requirements for the job, but the company told her to ask for her parents consent. She finally couldn't continue to hide her plan to go abroad from her parents.

"My mother was crying and my father showed his guilty face when I told them about it. He only saw the letter of consent, which he had to sign. He repeatedly read it. I convinced them that I would be fine and father finally signed it," she said.

But the letter wasn't enough to clear her to go abroad. While she had completed all the requirements, including paying 50,000 rupiah for a medical check-up she didn't yet receive the authorization to leave for Malaysia. She waited for the news for six months. The company only said that the Malaysian factory put off accepting migrant workers.

While she was waiting for the job, Dina met a relative who worked as broker for another Indonesian migrant worker recruitment company. He told her of Hong Kong and that many women could earn a lot of money by working there. It was an easy job with high wages, and he said she would not have to pay anything before departure. Dina believed him and was captivated by the story.

She then moved to the company her relative told her about. She completed all the requirements and asked permission from her parents, who sadly allowed her to go.

For four days, Dina stayed at the company in Malang. She and several women who had the same goals as her were sleeping in a garage because the company didn't have a shelter. They slept on a thin mat and used their bags as pillows.

On the fourth day, Dina and the women were moved to a shelter in Madiun, around five hours away by bus from Malang.

In Madiun, she had reached a better place. She also began to receive instruction in English and Cantonese to help her do her job later in Hong Kong. She did well in the language courses, as well as in the other training. Therefore, the company trusted her to do some work in the office and appointed her as the training shelter coordinator.

When she had passed the courses and was waiting for her Hong Kong job contract, the company told her to work at a private home in Madiun. They called this 'field training' but it was actually just exploiting her labor. She did household tasks there, such as sweeping, gardening, and cleaning the bathroom.

She worked there for a month. She stayed in a tiny warehouse behind the house. She slept on small bed with the employers used things. The only light in the room came from a five-watt lamp, which was not enough for her to read and to write letters at night. Meanwhile she was always annoyed by the sound of rats seeking places to hide between the used items, and often did not get enough sleep.

The only activity she enjoyed was crossing off the pages of the calendar every morning. "Every time I crossed off one page of the calendar, it meant I had passed one more day of my field training," she said.

On the 22nd of June 1997, she received her visa to work in Hong Kong. On that day, she went to



Hong Kong with the new clothes she bought for 50,000 rupiah, the wages from her field work in Madiun.

She arrived at the Hong Kong airport around 1:00 a.m. A staff member from the employment agency picked her up and then she slept in the agency office. The following day, the employers brought her back to their house.

Hong Kong was a new experience for her. She didn't know that migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong are legally recognized as workers and that they enjoy protection and have rights under Hong Kong law. This law includes a minimum standard wage for domestic workers.

She only knew, at that time, that her wage – as it was stated in her contract – was HK\$ 2,000. She even had to hand over her first two months wages to the agency. She didn't know that Hong Kong laws stated a minimum wage of HK\$ 3,860 for migrant domestic workers. She wasn't aware that migrant domestic workers also have the right to one day off a week, she only enjoyed one day off every two weeks.

Then, getting information from other migrant domestic workers, she found out that she had been deceived by the agency. She didn't protest this. She only wanted to ease the burden of her family and allowed the unfair situation to go on.

She was not annoyed by agency's unjust acts because she had a good and friendly relationship with her employer. During the time she worked in the employer's house in Yau Tong, Dina received kind treatment. The Cantonese she learned in Indonesia helped her to communicate with the employer and helped avoid misunderstandings.

Even when the employer asked her to work in their father's and brother's houses, Dina didn't protest it as she felt the employer had a kind and friendly manner.

She worked there until her job contract expired two years later. She then decided to move to another employer in search of a higher wage and to enjoy her rights as stipulated in Hong Kong law.

Her old employer tried to prevent her from moving. They already liked her. But because they only offered a wage of HK\$ 2,800 per month, they couldn't convince her to stay.

By paying the agency HK\$ 8,000, Dina was able to move to a new employer living in Causeway Bay. At the new place, her wage was finally the minimum wage as mandated under Hong Kong laws and she received one day off a week.

Like when she was working for her old employer, she felt comfortable working for the new employer because they were kind people. Though she had to clean a bigger house than old employers, she didn't complain. She also didn't protest when the new employer banned her from watching television during the day when the employers were out. "For me, it was a fair rule because they have to make money for paying my wage; it was unfair when I spent my working hours watching television," she said.

Her understanding and her diligence satisfied her employer and they never protested about the activities she did during her holidays. They didn't complain when Dina took a course in Mandarin at City College and when she joined the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU), the only Indonesian migrant worker's union legally registered in Hong Kong.

The employer even gave her permission to attend the regional Migrant Conference on Re-

Brave Women



Integration in Taiwan during late August 2000 and the World Conference of Anti-racism in Kathmandu, Nepal, during late April 2001.

Dina started to become involved in IMWU after she met a member of the union at the YMCA College in Tsim Sha Tsui, where she was looking for information about a computer course at the college. In fact, the new friend already had a relationship with the YMCA College and their computer course for domestic workers every Sunday. So, Dina decided to join the course and then actively started to take part in other IMWU activities.

She remembers that joining IMWU gave her happy days because she made lot of new friends and gained new knowledge. She attended almost all of the IMWU courses, such as paralegal training, leadership, gender issues, and advocacy methods.

Because of her diligent and active participation, she was appointed as the IMWU envoy to attend the international conferences in Taiwan and Nepal.

In late 2000, she was named as the coordinator of the reintegration division of IMWU. This division prepared programs to be run by Indonesian migrant workers when they returned home. Of course, it was not only IMWU preparing the programs. At the same time, IMWU became a part of the Coalition for Migrant Rights (CMR), a wider coalition of migrant workers organizations from various countries. A number organizations and unions from Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Philippines, and Thailand were also members of the coalition. CMR was also involved in the reintegration program.

Supported by the Asian Migrant Centre (AMC), CMR also studied the conditions of Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong. Dina presented results of that study to the NGO Forum World Conference against Racism in Kathmandu, Nepal. She was representing CMR Hong Kong. "The study attracted international attention, particularly the severity of violations towards migrant workers rights," she said.

Besides building coalitions with organizations and unions from different countries, IMWU also joined in an alliance of Indonesian migrant workers organizations in Hong Kong under an umbrella group named Koalisi Tenaga Kerja Indonesia di Hong Kong – The Coalition of Indonesian Workers in Hong Kong (KOTKIHO). There are six other Indonesian migrant workers organizations also joining this coalition. They are Forum Mukminat Peduli Umat (FKMPU), Yogya International Club (YIC), Persatuan Dakwah Victoria (PDV), Asosiasi Masyarakat dan Mantan Nakerwan Indonesia Hong Kong (Amanah), Sanggar Budaya, and Majelis Taklim.

These activities and actions, created a gap between the union, IMWU, and the Indonesian consulate in Hong Kong. "We have been called provocateurs by the consulate because we often held rallies against unfair policies for migrant workers," she said.

But these criticisms didn't force her to stop her activities. She increasingly believed that they had to increase the power of migrant workers. The stronger they are, the stronger their bargaining position will be with the authorities. A strong, unified migrant workers organization will make the authorities afraid.

She was proved right when the Indonesian consulate finally softened their position, giving in to their demands and inviting an IMWU delegation to sit together with them and discuss migrant worker's



issues.

In mid-2001, her job contract ended. She decided to go home. She thought that she had spent enough time earning money abroad. She wanted to immediately revive her previous dreams: to be a student.

For the four years that she worked in Hong Kong, she had transferred most of her earnings support her family, paying off all their debts, and financing her brother and sister's studies. Her elder sister was able to continue her studies at the university.

Her mother, who had one more child when Dina was working in Hong Kong, wasn't afraid anymore about the future of her six children thanks to Dina's help.

After easing the family's burden, Dina was determined to go off to university by relying on remainder of her savings from the last year she worked abroad.

However, before she went home, her father had been feeling guilty about this situation. He hated to let his daughter go abroad as a domestic worker to support the family when he should have assumed this role.

Carrying these guilty feelings, her father decided to go off to Malaysia to work. He was ready to do anything to earn money. He wanted to assume the responsibility for supporting the family that had been taken over by Dina. But only wanting this was not enough.

Because of the deceitfulness of the employment agency, her father was stranded in Malaysia. But that was not the end. He faced an additional hardship as he was forced into a job as a driver transporting illegal migrant workers from Indonesia to Malaysia at Sabah. The employer refused to pay his wages.

Without money, he went home and again relied on Dina's funds from Hong Kong. His didn't want to accept that his daughter was supporting the family, but reality limited his options.

When Dina arrived at the home village, she was touched by her father's sadness. She used half of her savings, which she originally planed to use to pay for her university study, to buy him a small truck. With the truck, he could run a business transporting cows.

Meanwhile, her older sister was going to Taiwan after receiving a bachelor degree and started to help the household. Her mother could then re-open her rice-mill business, though the business was stagnant because of fluctuating rice prices. However, Dina was relieved because they had paid off all the debts. Their life was not as complicated anymore.

Meanwhile, with the rest of her savings, Dina was still able to realise her dreams. She registered at the University of Kanjuruhan, Malang, in mid-2001. She studied English in the Department of Educational Science and Teaching.

At first, she wanted to take an entrance examination for registering at the university. However since she hadn't studied for a long time, she wasn't allowed to take the examination. So, she chose the University of Kanjuruhan.

Interestingly, she didn't cut off her relationship with IMWU after she went home. A number of IMWU members still often contacted her. She was also invited to some meetings held by the IMWU branch in Indonesia. Unfortunately she couldn't attend because she was busy registering at the university.

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Finally, after she had finished all the process necessary to register, she could attend the meeting of ex-Indonesian migrant workers in Wisma Ori, located in Batu Raden, Banyumas. After the meeting, she continued to be involved in other meetings.

She still remembers that the non-governmental organization, Konsorsium Pembela Buruh Migran Indonesia (Kopbumi) was joining them at the meetings. Lots of Indonesian migrant worker's organizations were involved later on in the meetings. Eventually, at a meeting they agreed to unite and form a new umbrella organization, Jaringan Nasional BMI or Jarnas BMI (a national network of Indonesian migrant workers organizations).

The new organization then turned into the Federasi Organisasi BMI (federation of Indonesian migrant worker's organizations) at the First Congress held in Tawang Mangu, Solo, on the 25th of February 2003. The Federation consists of 14 organizations from eight provinces. At the Tawang Mangu meeting, she was elected to be the leader of the Federation. Her position was as chairwoman for national level.

She acknowledged that it was not easy to assume this responsibility. She had to watch all of the government policies regarding Indonesian migrant workers. Under her leadership, the organization tried to propose a law protecting migrant workers and their families.

Amid her busy activities as the leader of the Federation, she kept spare time for her studies. She had to go to Jakarta from Malang every two weeks because her campus was located in Malang and the office of the Federation in Jakarta. As a result, she allocated two weeks for study in Malang and then two weeks for Federation activities in Jakarta.

But the organization, in fact, needed more sacrifice. They asked her manage it full time and move to Jakarta. As she was already committed to the Federation, she decided to terminate her studies for a while after she had finished her fifth semester.

She poured all of her energy in to managing the organization. She lead programs for organizing migrant workers who had arrived in Indonesia, advocacy, settling cases, networking, education and training. She often went to the hospital where migrant workers were admitted after being victims of violence abroad.

"I also often became the field coordinator at rallies against unjust policies for migrant workers," she said. She also represented migrant workers issues to the media. She often received invitations to speak or join a dialog about migrant workers, including meetings in other countries.

To build a strong, wide network of migrant workers, in 2004, the Federation joined with the Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) – a member of Migrant Rights International (MRI).

In June 2005, at the Second Congress of the Federation, they agreed to change its name to Serikat Buruh Migran Indonesia (SBMI). Again, they asked her to lead the organization. But, she refused it. She chose to continue her studies instead. She didn't abandon them completely, she pledged that she would actively take part in the migrant worker's events, even though she wasn't the leader anymore. The organization accepted her decision and asked her to be one of officials in the Consultative Council of the organization, she agreed.

After becoming a member of the Council, she stayed actively involved in the network of migrant



worker's organizations during her studies, but she didn't commute from Malang to Jakarta anymore. She actively helped the organization's branch in Malang.

While preparing her thesis, she sometimes visited migrant workers and their families in Malang. She suggested to potential migrant workers to be cautious about the agency's offers and to learn about their rights. Her family, particularly her father, supported her organizational activities.

Unfortunately, her father can't support her anymore as he had a stroke and died in March 2006. "It made me depressed, but I tried to wake up and actively take part in the migrant worker's struggle," she said.

That same year, she graduated from the university. She decided to work some place that handles migrant workers issues. She filed an application with Fiedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) that since 1966 has worked with the Indonesian government to run a program of social empowerment. The foundation's program is working to build capacity with trade unions – including migrant worker's organizations – and to build political awareness programs for civil society by holding campaigns with independent media.

She has enjoyed her job. FES then placed her in Aceh as a staff program officer. Interestingly, besides working at FES, she also joined with the Trade Union Care Centre (TUCC), an organization concerned with trade unions. At TUCC, she was active in the Trade Union Division.

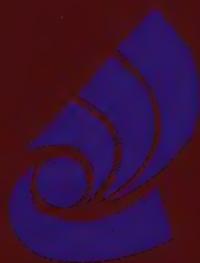
She said, her involvement in migrant worker's issues gave her the idea that empowering trade unions should lead to empowering migrant workers. She saw that Aceh needs an organization for managing migrant workers because many Acehnese were working abroad.

TUCC responded to her ideas by founding the Migrant Workers and Women Division. TUCC also helps trade union activists in Aceh by preparing and drafting qanun, regional laws, on manpower, including laws effecting Indonesian migrant workers.

In the long term, she will promote efforts to found migrant workers organizations in Aceh and to network with SBMI.

"My dream was only one. Later, all the Indonesian migrant workers organizations – either domestic or in the destination countries – will be united to build a large power base for fighting against all of the unfairness towards migrant workers. In this way they will have a higher bargaining position to influence policies, either at the national, regional, or international level," she said.

It seems she doesn't only dream about changes. She has started the change herself by giving her unyielding commitment and solidarity to the cause. (*)



Flat 6, 13/F Block A
Fuk Keung Industrial Building
66-68 Tong Mi Road, Prince Edward, Kowloon, Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 2312 0031, Fax: (852) 2992 0111
Website: asian-migrants.org