

BANGKOK - On the outskirts of Bangkok, a 17-year-old domestic worker from Myanmar removes a baseball cap to expose the scars on her head where Thai surgeons inserted a metal plate.

It was the only way to save the girl's life following a savage beating at the hands of her local employer – a middle-aged Thai woman. The employer then dragged the girl's comatose body out to the street, flagged down a taxi and gave the driver the equivalent of USD\$ 300 to “take her as far away as possible.”

Instead, he took her to a hospital where she remained for months.

More than a thousand kilometers away, a young Vietnamese woman tells a similar story. She turns around and lifts her top to reveal dozens of scars across her back. “The (family) whipped me with an electrical chord – nearly everyday.”

Sadly this kind of abuse is not isolated.

In many countries, domestic work is not considered formal employment and often falls outside the scope of labour protection laws. Put simply, domestic workers are often at the mercy of their employers. Should the employer physically or sexually abuse them, withhold wages or degrade them, many women, in both perception and reality, feel they have little recourse except to run away.

But many are migrants from other countries, working without proper visas. If caught by the authorities they could be immediately deported or face further abuse.

This year, at the annual International Labour Conference (ILC) in Geneva, delegates from Governments, Workers' and Employers' Organizations have discussed gender issues in the context of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda. It was the first dedicated, formal, gender discussion by the Conference for nearly a quarter of a century.

A report to the Conference noted that in the intervening 25 years “problems persisted or had deepened for the most vulnerable” including women in domestic work. The present economic downturn and jobs crisis sweeping the world is likely to aggravate those vulnerabilities. Among the discussion's 58 conclusions, was an acknowledgment that “in some situations paid domestic labour has remained as one of the few options for women including migrants”.

But domestic work needn't be a perennially hazardous occupation. The participants at the ILC noted that by formalizing the ‘informal’ nature of work (including domestic work), the security of women in those occupations could be improved.

The Rapporteur for the debate (who is also an Indonesian government delegate), Ms Myra Hanartani, noted that in advancing gender equality countries have different needs. “We need to strengthen our informal economy to make it part of the formal economy to offer better social protection.”

In effect, the idea is to make sure that working out of sight does not mean being cut off from labour rights, or exclusion from the basic human right of decent work.

While changing policies on the formal and informal sectors will require considerable technical work, public attitudes toward domestic workers are slowly changing through advocacy and self-help.

In hundreds of thousands of homes across Asia, paid domestic workers routinely sweep the floors, wash the dishes and care for their employers' children.

"My first priority is to babysit," said Radha, an Indian woman in her late 30's. She arrived in New Delhi 12 years ago from her village in the far northeast of the country. Radha's employer treats her well, pays her above the minimum wage, and encourages her to take part in domestic skills training programmes sponsored by the local Government and supported by the ILO's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

The encouragement, training and support she's received contrast sharply with the stories of the other two women. Radha exudes self-esteem and dignity. "Some people say that domestic work is not really work. I don't think that's true. This is important work, at least to us".

In the coming months, in several countries across South and Southeast Asia, domestic workers will receive ILO-supported guide books on their rights and ways to stay safe – and how to network – regardless of their migratory or visa status. The awareness and advocacy campaign will upscale lessons learned from last year's information campaign in Thailand called Travel Smart – Work Smart.

"This booklet has helped me to understand how we can help each other," said Phun, a domestic worker from Myanmar now working in Bangkok. "I am now aware of the legal working hours. I was being forced to work for too many hours before".

In order to help formalize the informal employment sector as it relates to domestic work, and offer better protection to domestic workers in general, next year's International Labour Conference will begin the process of developing a legal instrument, or Convention on Domestic Work.

International recognition of domestic work is long overdue, according to Radha. As she cooks lunch for her employer she remarks - "everyone thinks that their work is significant, and to us domestic work is important."