

The Plight of a Migrant Worker with HIV/AIDS

By Gita Lingga, Communications Officer, ILO Jakarta

BALI (ILO News): Ms. Marites Cardines is a former migrant worker from the Philippines. As a migrant worker her dream was simple; to help her family get out of poverty. She started working as a migrant domestic worker in Qatar in 1992 when she was only 17 years old. She soon discovered that her employers were exploitative and abusive. She had too little food to eat, had to work long hours without rest, and was even paid less than was stipulated in her contract.

"There were several occasions when my male employer made sexual advances to me. I could do nothing to stop him. All I could do was endure the hardships for the sake of my family," she said. Ms Cardines made the remarks while serving as a panelist in a symposium organized by the ILO, the Joint United Nations Initiative on Mobility and HIV/AIDS in South East Asia (JUNIMA), UNDP and UNAIDS, entitled "the Impact of Financial Crisis on Labour Migration and HIV" at the 9th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific in Bali on 12 August 2009.

Ms Cardines faced her worst nightmare when she took her second job in Dubai in 1999. "I was hired by a real monster. I was repeatedly raped by my male employer. When I had mustered enough courage, I told my lady employer about what her husband had been doing to me," she said, bluntly.

To her surprise and relief, her female employer helped her to report the case to the authorities. It was a unique experience; having the wife of an Arab employer taking the side of a foreign domestic worker. With a help of her lady employer, she was able to return home. "Unfortunately, nothing came out of the case I file against my employer," Ms. Cardines said.

Yet, she refused to lose hope and was planning to go back working overseas. But when she was about to leave for Malaysia she learnt that she was diagnosed with HIV. "I was so shocked that I cried everyday. It was so hard to accept because at that time I did not have any idea about HIV/AIDS. I thought I was dying," she continued.

Fortunately, in the hospital she met a volunteer of Positive Action Foundation Philippines (PAFPI) who provided her with proper information related to HIV/AIDS. The organization also introduced her to their support group, and she started to be actively involved in the activities of PAFPI.

"I was given many opportunities to become an advocate. I am also a member of BABAE PLUS, a support group of women living with HIV. In this group, we learn our rights as women and this helps me with my relationship with my children and husband. I help to organize newly-diagnosed people living with HIV into a group named Cebu Plus, which has started to undertake innovative activities and was able to facilitate free CD4 count services to all of its members," she said.

Since she can no longer work abroad she also actively educates potential migrant workers about their HIV risk and vulnerability. To ensure that the rights of migrant workers to information related to HIV are realized, she volunteers as one of the facilitators on pre-departure orientation seminars for all migrant workers in Cebu City, Philippines.

"Unsafe migration and HIV can have dramatic effects to people's lives and their families. I hope that you will continue to advocate for the protection of migrant workers," she appealed to the symposium audience, calling for the more active involvement of ICAAP participants in advocating the issues related to HIV, in particular to migrant workers.