

“No one should work this way: Decent Work for Migrant Domestic Workers”

Summary of advocacy events during the Civil Society Forum and Asian and Pacific Conference on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Beijing+20 Review

14-20 November 2014, United Nations, Bangkok

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) organized two Beijing +20 events in cooperation with UN Women and other UN agencies, including the ILO.

Three advocacy events on decent work for domestic workers were organized by ILO Bangkok with support of the UN-Bangkok Technical Working group on Migration, UN Women and ESCAP: an exhibition during the entire Forum and Conference, a side event during lunch time on 18 November for delegates to the Conference, and a media event at the Foreign Correspondents Club in the evening of 18 November 2014, which was open to the public. The highlights of these events follow below.

EXHIBITION



Pavitra (not her real name) was raped by her employer. The female employer refused to believe her, and Pavitra was sent to prison for months for seducing the male employer. She is now 8 months pregnant with his child. She plans to give the child up for adoption and fears that if her family found out about the rape, she would be abandoned.

In 2013 the well-known photographer Steve McCurry and journalist Karen Emmons joined forces with the ILO's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (ROAP), and domestic and migrant workers' support organizations on an advocacy project to promote the rights of domestic workers and expose some of the abuses and poor conditions that a significant minority experience. The aim was to raise awareness, support a change in public attitudes, and encourage respect for domestic workers' rights – including those enshrined in ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).

Working *pro bono* Karen and Steve photographed and recorded extensive interviews with 25 domestic workers and activists in four Asian locations – Hong Kong, China; Indonesia; Nepal and the Philippines – all major nexuses for domestic workers. A selected number of photographs were recently published in the International New York Times but this occasion was the first time the photos have been exhibited. The stories reveal physical, mental and verbal abuse, starvation, child labour, forced labour, trafficking, rape, unpaid wages, imprisonment and restrictions on movement and communication. The photos were on display throughout the entire Beijing+20 Forum and Conference in a prominent position near

the entry and registration desk. Over 700 participants attended the meetings and had the opportunity to view the exhibition.



Ms Sandra Polaski, ILO Deputy Director General for Policy met with HomeNet representatives and visited the exhibition during her mission to Bangkok. She expressed support for further iterations of the exhibition, including to coincide with the anniversary of the ILO Convention 189, 16 June, also known as Domestic Workers Day.



SIDE EVENT

The Domestic Workers Convention, is the only international instrument specifically focusing on domestic workers. So far it has been ratified by 16 countries, including just one, the Philippines, in the Asia–Pacific region. A far greater number has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which through its General Recommendation 26 provides guidance on women migrant workers. Reflecting these international standards, the ILO and UN Women organized the official side event for the Technical Working Group on Migration.

The side event highlighted the stories and experiences of some migrant domestic workers, and discussed how better legislation and enforcement can contribute to the protection of migrant workers. Over 300 government delegates and civil society representatives were introduced to the event through song, with representatives of the Network of Domestic Workers in Thailand and HomeNet Thailand sharing their musical expression of the demands of domestic workers in the region.



Attendees then heard reflections from the panellists, as introduced by the moderator, **Ms Thetis Mangahas**, the ILO ROAP Deputy Regional Director.

Panellists were:

Ms Karen Emmons is an American journalist who has lived and worked in Asia for the past 25 years, after working as a staff reporter with LIFE magazine in New York City. Karen discussed the process of gathering these photos and her interviews with the women featured. She talked about the bravery shown by the subjects, and the importance of visually depicting their experiences to build empathy for domestic workers across the globe. She emphasized the similarities between the experiences she heard, which demonstrated the systemic discrimination of migrant domestic workers.

Ms Bijaya Rai Shrestha is a returnee woman migrant worker and the Director of POURAKHI-Nepal (an organization of returnee women migrant workers in Nepal). She has played a crucial role in uniting returnees as well as potential women migrant workers under POURAKHI's umbrella and strengthening the network for the protection of their rights. She now supports returnee women migrant workers and their family members through entrepreneurship development trainings for their social and economic empowerment. Bijaya spoke about the financial imperative that drove her, and many like her, to find work overseas. She discussed the social costs of being separated from family, but also the opportunities that economic empowerment offers women migrant workers, and the need to ensure that migration is a choice, not an economic necessity.

Ms Elizabeth Tang is the International Coordinator and General Secretary of the International Domestic Workers' Federation, which brings together domestic workers' organizations so that they will become stronger and be connected with each other and workers in other sectors, nationally, regionally and internationally. Elizabeth shared her experience organising domestic workers through the Federation, and called for the ratification of the Domestic Workers Convention and the core international

standards, especially those that promote equality, and provide for the fundamental rights to organise and bargain collectively. She spoke of the need for domestic workers to have a united voice in advocating for improved conditions of work and highlight the inherent value of domestic work in the society.

The event also included audience participation, with the delegate from the Philippines reflecting on their experience advocating for and ratifying the ILO Domestic Workers Convention and other audience members discussing the stories and ideas presented by the panellists. The link between the Domestic Workers Convention No. 189, decent work, economic empowerment and gender equality was clearly enunciated by the moderator.

MEDIA PANEL discussion at the Foreign Correspondent's Club of Thailand (FCCT)

In the evening, another panel event was held at the Foreign Correspondent's Club of Thailand (FCCT) to attract journalists and media coverage of the photos, with speakers as above, and Thetis Mangahas representing the ILO. The event was moderated by Thompson Reuters journalist, Ms Thin Lei Win, a Myanmar national who has reported extensively on women's rights in the region. Ms Lei Win discussed some of her own experiences with migrant children domestic workers from Myanmar, including a case where a young woman had been confined to her employers' home for over seven years.



Other panellists reprised their earlier comments, with Karen discussing further the individual stories behind the photos, and Thetis outlining the importance of rights at work and the ILO framework. A Skype interview with Steve McCurry heard his reflections on the abuse and exploitation, drawing on the similarities between this assignment and his coverage of more easily recognised human disasters, including famine and war.

The FCCT event resulted in coverage in the Bangkok Post – <http://www.bangkokpost.com/lifestyle/art/444164/faces-of-hard-truths>

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