

CARAM Asia's Statement on International Women's Day

KUALA LUMPUR 8 March, 2010: 100 years after the world recognized the role of women in society, women are still robbed off their rights.

On the occasion of the 100th year anniversary of International Women's Day, CARAM Asia calls upon governments in both sending and receiving countries to protect the rights of migrant women who constitute more than half of the migrant population in the world today. CARAM Asia also urges States to invest in the health -including sexual, reproductive and HIV programmes and services - and education of women to ensure that migration becomes a choice rather than a necessity for survival.

In an increasingly globalised world, female migrant workers face intersectional discrimination of class, race, religion, and gender due to statelessness or their irregular status. Neo-liberal strategies have caused the commodification of women's labour whereby profits rest on women's labour and sexuality. Influenced by market fundamentalism and pro-capitalism, the business sector prey on women's labour as a means to gain from a workforce which is unskilled, cheap and deemed as easily subjugated by state and employers. Governments must ensure women are protected against scrupulous agents who sell women's labour and employers who exploit them.

Women's labour are either not accorded value or given low value as their labour continues to be viewed as a natural extension of women's traditional, unpaid role as mothers and care providers contributing solely to social reproduction. Local domestic workers are forced to become part-timers or informal workers without any labour rights, meanwhile their foreign counterparts are hired as live in "maids" which makes them easily controlled by employers. With the advent of globalisation, poverty and the collapse of the rural economy, more women have been pushed out to work mostly in the domestic work sector, either at home or crossing boundaries to take on employment as foreign domestic workers (FDWs). These FDWs are today akin to modern day slaves.

Despite a spate of FDW reported abuse in the media, both Malaysian and Indonesian government have not agreed on ways to improve the working conditions for Indonesian domestic workers.

Negotiations for the new MOU have been going on for over half a year now, but with little transparency and consultation between civil society of both countries. The news that trickles out suggests a lack of reforms and commitments in ensuring that domestic workers are recognized as full workers, with all labour rights accorded to them.

By June this year, the international community with governments, trade unions and employers associations vote for or against the setting up of an international labour standard to grant labour rights to domestic work. CARAM Asia urges states with voting power in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to cast their vote in support for a Convention supplemented by a recommendation to protect the rights of domestic workers who are predominantly migrant women.

CARAM Asia calls upon States to:

1. Amend existing local laws or enact new laws to be in line with the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (MWC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).
2. Extend equal protection of the labour laws to women migrant workers in informal sectors like domestic work. Domestic workers should be granted the rights to a just wage, overtime pay, weekly rest days, benefits, and workers' compensation.
3. Address the violation of human rights and women's specific vulnerabilities in the process of migration by providing an empowering environment in both sending and receiving countries where women have job options to work in their country of origin.
4. Ensure migrant women's access to gender sensitive public health and support services including sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services.
5. Remove mandatory health and pregnancy testing policies and the following deportation of pregnant women migrants, migrants tested positive for HIV and other illnesses.
6. Remove requirement for migrant women to seek destination governments' permission to marry men in destination countries.

CARAM Asia is NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. It is an open network of NGOs and CBOs, consisting of 38 members covering 18 countries in Asia and the Middle East. Visit www.caramasia.org for more information on CARAM Asia.