

## **Domestic Work, Work Like Any Other**

Two months ago, a 23-year old domestic worker from a little-known Indonesian city was named as one of Time's 100 Most Influential People. Ms Erwiana Sulistyaningsih was recognized alongside presidents and popstars for what she didn't do – Erwiana didn't stay silent.

Today is International Domestic Workers Day, and at the International Labour Organization we are reflecting on the contributions of women like Erwiana. Since she returned from Hong Kong to her home in Indonesia, Erwiana has been campaigning for the rights of domestic workers. During her eight months on the job in Hong Kong, Erwiana was violently abused by her employer, and when her injuries prevented her from continuing to work, she was sent home with just US\$9 in her pocket. Erwiana began campaigning for domestic workers just like her, many of them migrant women, most of them still vulnerable in their workplaces across the globe.

There are over 20 million domestic workers in the Asia Pacific Region alone – that's the population of Sri Lanka – but because these workers are often hidden in private homes, in workplaces that remain unregulated, they are especially vulnerable to abuse. In many countries, domestic workers aren't protected by the general labour law, and are excluded from receiving the minimum wage. On average, domestic workers earn less than half of average wages; some earn less than a fifth.

Despite the risks, domestic work is a fast growing sector. Globally, there are 19 million more domestic workers today than there were in the mid-1990s – that's a thirty per cent increase in less than 20 years. Over eighty percent of these workers are women.

Malaysia is a top destination for migrant domestic workers from around the region - around a quarter of a million are currently employed in the country. There is no recognition of domestic work as work in the Employment Act of Malaysia, however the Government is seeking to introduce protections for domestic workers through a new Employment Regulations (Domestic Servant) Act.

The world needs these women. Migrant domestic workers contribute significantly to their home communities, sending remittances that are regularly spent on the education and health needs of the domestic worker's family, and increasing the GDP and development potential of their countries. Domestic workers enable members of the employer's household to go to work by reducing the time needed for cleaning, cooking, shopping and family tasks.

We need to realize the benefits that domestic work, and migration into domestic work, can offer, and this can only be achieved if these women are in safe and profitable work. A binding Protocol on Forced Labour was passed just days ago at the International Labour Conference, and includes new provisions that aim to increase protection and compensation for victims of forced labour. The Protocol recognizes that these profits should rightfully go to the workers and their families, instead of lining the pockets of recruitment companies that charge excessive or fraudulent fees or exploitative employers who profit from forced labour. The International Labour Organization recently estimated that over US\$8 billion dollars in profits are made each year from domestic workers in forced labour.

This is in part because many people still see domestic work as a woman's unpaid familial duty, or a job for a lower class or caste of women, instead of as productive work for wages like any other. This misconception has slowed the process of recognizing domestic workers rights, in international law and in our own homes. On 16 June 2011, the first convention recognizing the rights of domestic

workers was adopted. Today, we commemorate that moment where the international community finally and positively stated that ‘domestic work is work.’

So far, 14 countries have agreed to enshrine basic rights for domestic workers by ratifying ILO Convention No. 189. On the anniversary of its adoption, I call on all governments to consider ratification of the Convention and the inclusion of domestic workers in the general protections provided by the labour law. I urge that the Malaysian Employment Regulations (Domestic Servant) Act currently being drafted to reflect the standards in Convention No. 189.

But you don’t need to wait for your government to act to improve the lives of domestic workers. If you employ a domestic worker, have a conversation with her about ways to implement the Convention in your own home. Recognize her right to a full day of rest each week, reasonable working hours, and fair wages in line with the minimum wage. Refuse to employ children under the minimum age for work and allow young workers to combine work and school. Encourage your domestic worker to join a network or association of domestic workers. Provide holiday and sick pay, social security entitlements and insurance, freedom of movement, and payment in cash. Respect your domestic worker’s right to privacy, and make sure she has a lockable bedroom if she lives in your home.

I admire Erwiana’s courage. She stood up and fought for her rights and dignity as a human being, and for the rights of other domestic workers like her. Erwiana shouldn’t stand alone. Stand with her by protecting the rights of domestic workers in your home and your community. Call on your government to ratify the Convention and ensure that women have safe and profitable access to these much-needed jobs. If we don’t acknowledge domestic workers as the valuable members of society that they are and protect them fully under the law, how many more cases like Erwiana’s will there be?

**Mr Yoshiteru Uramoto, ILO Regional Director for Asia and Pacific**