

Stories from the field 2018

Safe and Fair Programme: Realizing women migrant workers' rights and opportunities in the ASEAN region

1. Story from the field: Survivors building better service provision in the Philippines

"My name is Lucille (*alias*). I'm a 37-year-old Filipina. After studying Business Administration at college, I decided to become a migrant worker to earn money and to help my family. I knew it would be a hard job. However, I didn't expect to experience violence. I was hired as a caregiver to take care of a man who had a stroke. While I was in Singapore, the employer never paid me. Other migrant workers and I in the house were not allowed to have any food without the employer's permission. We could have our first meal at 5 pm only when the employer brought food to us. Sometimes, she didn't give us food for over a week.

One day, I delivered a newspaper to the man as usual. He smiled when he was reading the newspaper. I was happy to see the man happy, so I smiled back at him. When the employer saw us smiling, she through a cup at me, leaving a large bruise. This was not the first time I'd experienced physical abuse, and I made the decision to leave the house. The next day, a friend helped me report to the police. However, the employer was already at the police station to report me for running away. Luckily, there was a CCTV in the house, and the CCTV had captured the incident. I was lucky because too often, migrant workers go to jail or are fined when we seek support from police. Police tend to trust the employer more than migrant workers.

Now I am back in the Philippines, helping Filipina migrant workers abroad. I don't want to see any other women migrant workers in a similar situation. To support women migrant workers, I connect them to government agencies and recruitment agencies. If a recruitment agency does not support a woman migrant worker when they are in trouble, I report the recruitment agency to the government. Unlawful agencies can lose their license. Connecting new women migrant workers to existing networks abroad is also part of my job.

The Safe and Fair Programme strongly aligns with the work that I am doing. I was at the Philippines Safe and Fair Consultative Dialogue last year. Through this I learned how crucial it is to understand women migrant workers' needs before service delivery. In addition, now I am be able to share more information about violence against women, what kind of support women need to receive and where they can seek help when they experience gender-based violence at work. Violence against women makes it hard for women migrant workers to seek support. I believe I can build more knowledge and skill through the Safe and Fair Programme so we can better protect our rights. There is still a lot to do, and I want to do more. The Safe and Fair Programme and I will need to work more building capacity for police officers and other service providers, and providing enough and adequate information for women migrant workers.



Initiated by the European Union and the United Nations:



I want to tell women who want to migrate: “You should get all the information you need, as much as you can. Knowledge and information will make you strong. Don't look at the rosy side of the future only. Otherwise, you might come back home with tears. However, when you are crying, there is always some who you can talk to. We will be there to hold your hands.”



2. Story from the field: Better VAW data and Thailand's One Stop Crisis Centres

In 2018, Dr. Danukrit, Deputy Director of the One Stop Crisis Center in Bangkok Thailand, participated in an intensive training course on violence against women (VAW) data with support from the Safe and Fair Programme. “I learnt that data is a must to make our service better, policy better and laws better,” Dr. Kalampakorn said. From the four weeks of learning, he said he built his skills in measuring VAW prevalence, as well as on how to use the data to advocate for policies and legislation. The course covered key concepts of VAW measurement, including tools used to generate reliable and comparable data, processes involved in undertaking a national prevalence survey, as well as strategies for keeping interviewed women safe and for ensuring an inclusive approach to understanding VAW.

“The Thai Government acknowledges the importance of having a national prevalence study and set up a working group to conduct a study in Thailand. As a member of the working group, I will provide technical inputs to ensure that the study captures the issues that we have, which will lead us to build a better policy. In addition to this, my role would be to make sure the survey reflects the reality of not just Thai women but also migrant women in Thailand. I strongly believe that understanding the problem through the prevalence survey is an essential step to move towards solving the issue.”

“Thanks to the training”, he said, “the One Stop Crisis Center is putting more efforts to have better data collection system and to use the data for a better service. On average, about 700 survivors per year visit the Centre to seek support and about 10 per cent of them are non-Thai. However, we do not have specific data to understand whether the non-Thai survivors are tourists, migrants, or migrant workers in Thailand. The service that we provide for them can be different based on their socio-demographic information. If we build a better data collection system to understand who the survivors are, we can provide better support to meet their needs. For instance, now the first-line service providers face a language barrier when the survivor is a migrant who cannot speak either Thai or English. If we have the data that can tell us how many migrants visit the hospital and where they are from, we can advocate for allocating more budget to hire proper translators. This is an example of how the hospital will use the data to improve the quality of the service.

Dr. Danukrit Kalampakorn said that there are strong needs from the field to learn more about VAW migrant workers face to improve the quality of services; however, not much training or research is done due to lack of resources. He added that the Safe and Fair Programme could be implemented in a way to fill this gap.

3. Story from the field: Strengthening women-led CBOs in Indonesia

That morning, Ida received a call from a family of a woman migrant worker who had just returned from Malaysia with an unpaid salary and having experienced physical violence. Ida helped her, handling the case voluntarily. After bathing her son, she rushed to the nearby computer and internet shop to write an “Authority Letter”. She then went to the city to meet relevant partners. It took 2-3 hours from her village to get to the city of Majalengka District in Indonesia by motorbike.

“My husband usually looks after my children while I am away. I am grateful that he always supports my activism”, she said.

Ida Neni Wahyuni (Ida) is the initiator and head of the community organization, Garda BMI, in Majalengka District, Indonesia. The organization has 50 active members, and has trained over 300 people. Garda BMI partners with the national and local Agency for the Service, Placement and Protection of Indonesian Overseas Workers (BP3TKI) and with the local Manpower Department.

Ida herself was a migrant worker to Malaysia and Singapore. In 2006 Ida left her hometown to work in Malaysia. Desperate for a better life, she accepted a broker’s offer to work abroad and agreed to a mark up of her age from 19 to 25 years old on travel documentation. She had completed junior high school, but had no foreign language skills and no experience of traveling beyond her hometown. Ida was eager to go abroad and save money, dreaming of building a business in her village.

Unfortunately, in Malaysia, she did not receive what she hoped for. She was denied communication with her family, had to work over 15 hours a day under CCTV surveillance, and was scolded by the recruitment agent and the employer when she complained about reduction in salary. When she migrated a second time headed to Singapore, an illegal recruitment agent placed her in a jail-like premise for two weeks before transporting her to Batam and then Singapore.

Luckily, in Singapore, she was paid well and had one free day a week. During her day off, she had the opportunity to enhance her capacity, to socialize and engage in a community organization, called Indonesian Family Network (IFN). This organization contributed to shape her perspective on migrant workers’ rights.

Ida was one of the participants of Safe and Fair’s CSO Training in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia from 13-16 November 2018. For Ida, the training was very useful as she gained skills and knowledge on gender equality in migration, community organization, and communication and negotiation skills:

“To be honest, I haven’t received such training before. Role play for negotiation, gender issues in migration, how to communicate with different people in various conditions, and basic law and regulations in handling cases, are very important and applicable for me”, Ida said.

In total 25 participants from various community organizations and women-led networks in West Java Province attended the four-day training aimed at strengthening CSOs in Indonesia and enhancing staff capacity to promote migrant workers' rights.

“Now I am confident in working with women migrant workers with depression. I now know technically how to handle that situation, and I also taught this to the members of my organization. They are very enthused”.

Ida and other participants hope there will be further trainings in the future that focus on other topics. Their hopes reflect a greater need for training and skill building among CBOs, social workers and women migrant worker advocates in Indonesia and the region.

4. Story from the field: Filipino domestic workers organizing in Malaysia

Jeana Payas is a Filipino domestic worker in Malaysia. She is the current Chairperson of *Asosasyon ng mga Makabayang Manggagawang Pilipino Overseas* (Association of Overseas Philippine Workers - AMMPO). AMMPO was organized by a Philippines union, *Sentro ng mga Nagkakaisa at Progresibong Manggagawa* (SENTRO), and since 2016 has been officially recognized by the Philippines Embassy in Malaysia. Jeana and AMMPO organize migrant domestic workers in Malaysia. Jeana's journey to AMMPO chairmanship began 18 years ago:

“My story as domestic worker started in the Philippines. I am a secondary school graduate, and before coming to Malaysia for work, I was a domestic worker in our country. My salary was not enough to meet the needs of our family. As my children were growing up, I knew that I need to look for a better source of income. Eighteen years ago, I decided to look for a job opportunity abroad.

I found an agency that helped me find a job in Malaysia, as a domestic worker. Little did I know, the agency would trick me and deduct six months of my salary. In addition, I was not informed of the work conditions such as other deductions, hours of work, or details about my employer and family.

Upon arrival in Malaysia, I was sent directly to my new home, my employers' home. I would have never imagined that for two years I would not have a day off, never imagined I would begin each day at 4:00am in the morning with just a cup of Milo and few biscuits, never imagined I would not have proper meals or end the days at 11:00pm. Each day, I wanted to escape and go back to the Philippines, but the employers had my passport in their custody. Sometimes, my employers would send me to clean their relatives' home, on top of the cleaning, laundry by hand, cooking, babysitting I did for them. Within two years, I felt confined, cheated, exploited, resulting in excessive weight loss and depression.

After two years and completing that first contract, I signed another contract with a new employer, who remains my current “boss”. My employer has a family of four, and I am grateful for the long years of service to them.”

Jeana joined AMMPO first as a member and describes being given the chance to understand about the situation of domestic workers, at risk of abuse particularly given the work is largely in isolation. As Chairperson she says:

“I now advance the advocacy of the Association and able to help my fellow migrant domestic workers who are now experiencing maltreatment by their employers.”

During 2018 through Safe and Fair, Jeana was able to network at global and regional levels with other women migrant workers who are organizers at: the Safe and Fair

“Regional Planning Meeting for Promoting ASEAN Women Migrant Workers’ Rights through Organizing” from 11-12 October 2018 in Bangkok, Thailand; and at the 2018 International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) Congress of global domestic worker organizers in Cape Town, South Africa.

Safe and Fair is funding an IDWF project called “Increasing Opportunities for ASEAN Women Migrant Domestic Workers to Organize”. IDWF has currently 69 affiliates from 55 countries organizing 700,000 domestic workers worldwide. However, migrant domestic workers are largely unorganized in the ASEAN region. Among IDWF’s affiliates in Asia, there are only some 1,000 migrant domestic workers (MDWs) organized from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Thailand. This is because, in Asia, migrant domestic workers are often denied of rights to organize, weekly day-offs and even freedom of movement. There are tremendous challenges, but it is possible.

Jeana describes how important Safe and Fair is to domestic worker advocacy:

“The Safe and Fair Programme helps us create a safe space to discuss fair wages, rest time and other basic provisions we should get as workers, which are constantly compromised. With being informed about our rights and pushing our advocacy to recognize domestic work as work, these helps us and our sector to bring our situations to public, to be heard and to be respected. They must know that behind other workers united and struggling for their rights are domestic workers praying to be heard.”

5. Story from the field: Strengthened Myanmar women migrant worker organizing in Thailand and beyond

M Hkawn Mai graduated from Mandalay University in Myanmar as a Geography major in 1994. After work with an NGO in Myanmar, she moved to Thailand in 2007 and started working at MAP Foundation in 2009.

Mai is the MAP Women's Exchange Advocacy Officer. Since 1999 MAP has supported migrant and refugee women coming together once a month throughout Thailand in "Women's Exchange" (WE) groups, empowering migrant women so they can advocate for a gender equal world as key decision makers at all levels of power. WE challenges the isolation imposed upon women migrant workers as so-called "aliens" under Thai law, in addition to social norms that consider women second to men with limited rights.

Begun in Chiang Mai, these women-only spaces became very popular and were replicated along the Thai-Myanmar border. Today, 18 WE groups of around 35-40 migrant women from Myanmar of different ethnicities, ages, and occupations meet regularly in:

- *Northern Thailand:* Chiang Mai city, Mae Sai, Mae Hong Son, Mae Sot
- *Central Thailand:* Bangkok, Mahachai
- *Western Thailand:* Sangklaburi
- *South of Thailand:* Ranong, Phang Nga, Ko Kaloi, Phuket, Hat Yai, Kuraburi, Surat Thani, Songkla

While each WE group throughout Thailand leads and organizes itself, as well as acts as a safety net to assist women facing problems, MAP Foundation provides financial assistance, leadership trainings, and resources to facilitate capacity building on a range of topics including sexual and reproductive health rights, living wage, women's economic rights.

From this base of work over 10 years on organizing and networking of Myanmar women migrants in Thailand, Mai attended the Safe and Fair "Regional Planning Meeting for Promoting ASEAN Women Migrant Workers' Rights through Organizing" from 11-12 October 2018. Women migrant worker organizers from all over ASEAN were present, allowing for key networking opportunities:

"I gained knowledge about migrant women's situation in other ASEAN countries, and I got to network with organizations from Thailand and Myanmar working on migrant women's rights in Thailand."

Mai particularly was able to form links with women migrant organizers who have formed a worker alliance of women migrants in the Thai seafood industry under the CSO Raks Thai. WE and Raks Thai have until now been working on migrant women's

issues in different areas of Thailand. Mai has already started reached out to Raks Thai after the Safe and Fair event for future cooperation in Women's Exchange.

In addition to networking, the Safe and Fair event brought Mai and other migrant women organizers together around advocacy issues, strengthening solidarity around the most urgent next steps to make migration safe and fair for women in ASEAN.

“This meeting helped me understand that CBOs and NGOs have to raise more awareness about pre-departure preparation with migrant workers who plan to migrate from their countries of origin to destination countries.”

“The meeting also gave me a chance to discuss about the need to tackle illegal migration broker companies, so that migration can be safer and fairer. We discussed the advocacy strategies for safe and fair migration campaign activities to advocate to both Thai and Myanmar governments.”

Photo 1: Mai leading a Women's Exchange activity

Photo 2: International Women's Day March with 110 Women's Exchange Leaders gathered in Chiang Mai 8 March 2019. Safe and Fair staff joined as well.

