

## Convention Protects Women Migrant Workers

**D**uring the 48th Session Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, Switzerland held on 3 March 1992, the Third World Movement Against the Exploitation of Women brought to the attention of the Commission the situation faced by thousands of women migrant workers in the world.

While the problems faced by migrant women cannot be isolated from the problems facing all migrant workers, it is nevertheless true that their situation is considerably harder than that of men. Women migrant workers are forced to live in more inhuman conditions in which migrants are generally forced to live in. To an even greater degree than men, the women are alienated, exploited and oppressed:

- as migrants sharing the conditions suffered by all migrant workers;
- as wives of migrant workers who have, in most cases, been obliged to leave their homes and follow their husbands;
- as women workers, working for the lowest wages in the hardest and most exhausting conditions, and subjected to discrimination and pettiness of all kinds;
- as foreign women who have to be the guardians and defenders of the traditions of their own countries while, at the same time, going through the cultural shock of adapting to new ways of life;
- as women living in a male-dominated industrial society and coming from societies where man is the absolute master;
- as mothers whose traditional role is to transmit the language, customs and religion of their country to their children while the children attend school where only the values, language and way of life of the receiving country are



taught; and

- as women vulnerable to sexual abuse, rape and violence.

Women migrant workers leave their countries and traditional homes primarily because of the unjust economic and political conditions in their own countries. These economic and political conditions are bred by the inequality of North and South international relations as well as by the international division of labor between the North and the South. Thus, women migrant workers, barely surviving in their own countries, are forced to look for opportunities for a better chance to live primarily for their families and for themselves.

Familial obligation is so deeply internalized in Third World women that they become, consciously or unconsciously, "sacrificers" for the benefit of other family members. Thus, many of these women migrant workers work abroad in order to earn enough for their families. The money that migrant workers send home resulting from their work contribute to their countries' capital accumulation and,

in the case of the Philippines, to debt servicing.

At the same time, the labor that women migrant workers give in to receiving countries, primarily the industrialized countries, are necessary for the functioning of these industrialized countries. The women migrant workers are received by these countries because of their countries' needs. For example, there is a felt need in these industrialized and newly developed countries for domestic services. Moreover, the need for entertainment, rest and recreation and sexual pleasures of the industrial men and technocrats have become more prevalent in these countries, particularly in the case of Japan which, by estimate, receives about 100,000 women entertainers every year.

The conditions most women migrant workers find themselves in consequent to their migration are more often than not fraught with harsh conditions of work and injustice. Research and studies on the plight of these women have revealed disturbing cases of violations of their human rights.

Moreover, the illegal status of a number of women migrants as workers without permits make these women more vulnerable to state control and punishment on one hand, and keeps them inferior to local workers, on the other hand. Treated as criminals, they cannot rely on justice or legal protection.

A specific example of this situation concerns the very recent newspaper report on the experiences of women migrant workers in Kuwait. One year after the liberation, hundreds of foreign workers, including Filipino and Sri Lankan women migrant workers, are being beaten and raped by their Kuwaiti employers. In January 1992, 172 Filipino women migrant workers were in the Philippine Embassy, some with faces so swollen their eyes are shut up. Up to a dozen more runaway housemaids arrived daily. Three-fourths of the women have told embassy officials they have been sexually assaulted. One badly cut and bruised woman said that her Kuwaiti boss had thrown her out of a second-story window.

At least 69 women had hidden in the Sri Lankan Embassy with up to eight more arriving daily. Officials report that as many as six sexual assault cases are reported each day and at least one pregnancy a month. Several dozen women hide in the Indian and Bangladeshi embassies with up to 20 more a day arriving.

According to the news report, Kuwaiti officials angrily deny the women as being abused -- as they did when the rapes were first reported in a newspaper -- and tell the outsiders to butt out. Interior Minister Ahmed Hamoud al-Sabah had reportedly stated that only Kuwaitis under the constitution have the right to criticize them but not the foreigners and that foreigners ought not interfere.

The example just shared with this Commission is merely one of the many other examples and is just the tip of the iceberg. What the situation does reveal is that more and more, women migrant workers all over the world, in varying degrees, suffer from harsh conditions of work, sexual abuse and violence, discrimination and injustice.

In response to this situation, studies and researches, as well as social workers giving direct assistance to the victims, have concluded that there is an urgent need for policy changes with regard to the treatment of migrant workers in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It is in this light that the Third World Movement against the Exploitation of Women welcomes the adoption by the General Assembly of the International Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers. This international instrument contains very important protective measures that, if implemented, will protect and promote the rights of migrant workers, including women migrants. We therefore urge the members of the Commission, as well as all other States, to ratify this Convention. ☐

*Source: Third World Movement Against the Exploitation of Women. 41 Rajah Matanda St., Proj. 4, Quezon City, Philippines 1109. Tel. (632) 786469; Fax: (632) 9215662.*

