



THE
KARIBU
FOUNDATION

VOICES FROM THE SOUTH

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The Karibu Foundation is an independent foundation that supports voices from the Global South that provide alternatives to the dominant paradigms of power, distribution, and development.

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Nothing about us without us: The significance of grassroots migrants’ voices in the debate about migration

In this month’s “Voices from the South,” Ms. Eni Lestari of the International Migrants Alliance (IMA) speaks of her experience as an Indonesian domestic worker in Hong Kong, and of the necessity to amplify the voices of migrant communities in settings where migration is debated. She argues that most international and governmental platforms that address migration are detached from the daily struggles of migrants, and that the voices of the millions of migrant workers, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and their families must be involved when policy is set about them. A link to the video from her speech to the UN is included.



By: Eni Lestari
Chairperson, IMA

What does an Indonesian domestic worker say when she speaks at a United Nations event?

This was a question I asked myself when the International Migrants Alliance (IMA) was in-

ited to be one of the resource people at an interactive civil society organization discussion on migration and the sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in New York in 2015.

I found the answer: I would speak in my own voice as a domestic worker, as a woman, and as a migrant.

I remember back when the UN’s millennium development goals were being first formulated. I was just a simple village girl back in Indonesia. I had big dreams for myself back then.

Sadly, those dreams did not happen. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 hit Indonesia, and subsequently my family. We lost our land, our parents their jobs, we were heavily in debt, and there was no work to

be found.

At a young age, I made the very hard decision to not pursue study and work as a domestic worker in Hong Kong. There, the lessons I learned were of hardship, sacrifice, blind obedience and subservience. In order for my family to survive, I had to endure the exploitation and abuse of my employer. I found myself basically a slave: my passport taken away, working 18 hours a day, my wages deducted for high agency fees, underpaid and suffering other maltreatments.

Yet, I fought back, and the rest, they say, is history.

Forming an organization for fellow Indonesian migrant workers, I learned with and from my fellow sisters that our stories were experienced by others too. We learned about our rights and what we can do to assert and win them. We learned that the realities of other migrants in Hong Kong were similar to the struggles of migrants in other countries, too. We learned about solidarity and the need to forge it together.

As the international community put together their millennium development goals, and many other policies that affect the lives of migrants, they did not fac-

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tor in the struggles of my sisters or other migrants. The voices of these communities were left out of the process.

I felt kind of detached from these intergovernmental platforms when they did not include our voices.

So when the UN asked me to speak about their new development goals last year, I told them this:

We currently have a global economic system that does not only work against the interests of peoples and of our collective rights, but it has also ravaged economies and our industries. It has caused massive poverty, and contributes to the phenomenon of forced labor migration. This system needs to be dismantled.

Reading the previous paragraph, one might say that we have lost faith in the system and in governments.

Yet, I argue that we need to keep engaging for a particular reason: so that the millions of migrant workers, im/migrants and their families, refugees and asylum seekers will have a say in policies being set about them.

Migrants at the grassroots level,

who are bearing the brunt of global crises, are calling for the protection of their rights. And we have won victories, like for the rights of Erwiana Sulistyarningsih (an Indonesian domestic worker who sought justice against her abusive employer in Hong Kong) and Mary Jane Veloso (a Filipina migrant worker who was a victim of human and drug trafficking and was spared from execution in Indonesia).

These stories present the reality of human trafficking, labor exploitation and modern-day slavery, but they also demonstrate that migrants are actively taking part to change this situation.

Yet we must continue to struggle so that no policy is being set about us without our voice present. We must relay the countless struggles of migrants and refugees on the ground, so that their rights, welfare and dignity are upheld.

If the UN, for example, wishes to be inclusive, the voices on the ground (specifically those of the marginalized) should be ensured at all times.

The same can be said about national governments determining their policies on migrants

or refugees. The negotiation table is never too small when we are talking about the lives and the dignity of grassroots communities that are forced to leave their homes.

At the end of that day, when I went back to Hong Kong after speaking at the UN in New York, the same realities as before had to be faced: exploitation, abuse, discrimination, marginalization and slavery. All too many migrant communities are facing these realities on a daily basis.

I ended my speech at the UN by saying, “I hope that by coming here and speaking to you directly you can honor not just my requests but the demands of millions of women like me. If not, please tell me where I should go to achieve it.”

Our voices need to be present when setting the agenda. And we must continue to work towards the welfare and dignity for migrant communities wherever we are. ■

Eni Lestari is an Indonesian domestic helper and migrant rights activist who has been working in Hong Kong since 1999. She is the current chairperson of the International Migrants Alliance (IMA). Learn more about IMA here: <http://wearemigrants.net/>

Her speech to the UN on the Post 2015 Development Goals can be seen at <https://youtu.be/PREfigQJxpA>

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