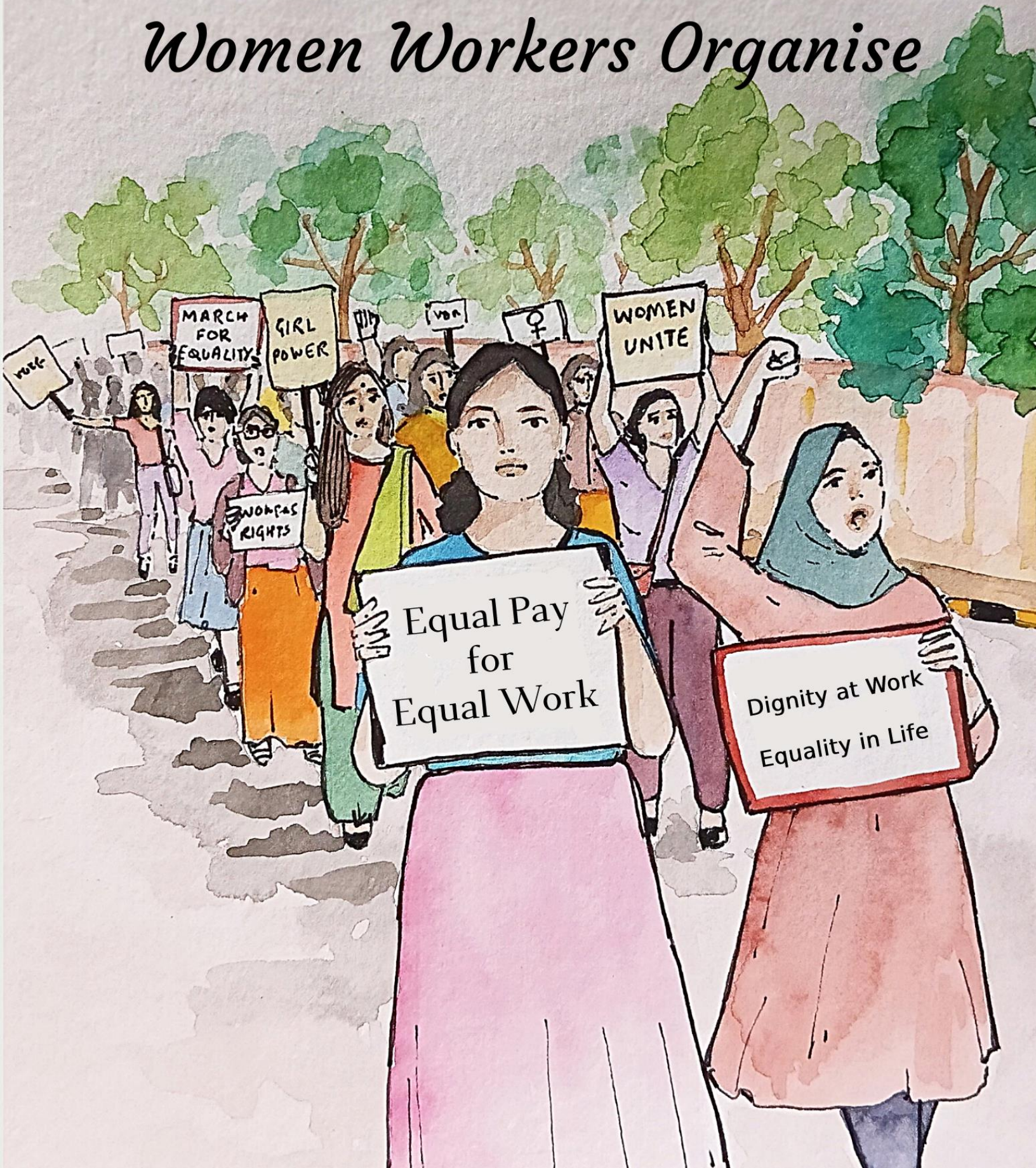


ISSUE 10, MAY 2023

OUR WORK, OUR LIVES

Women Workers Organise



Our Work, Our Lives

Issue 10, May 2023

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Cover Design: Tanuja Sethi



Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

Our **Work**, Our Lives

Many members and partners of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) work closely with women workers to support and strengthen their organising. The women earn their living from domestic work, sex work, agriculture, weaving, entertainment work, garment sector work, home-based work, and any available daily wage work. Except for those who are working away from home, all women also carry out much of the care work in their families. While some workers are affiliated with trade unions, others are part of informal collectives or community groups linked to local NGOs.

Since March 2021, some GAATW members and partners have been part of an online initiative called ***Women Workers for Change***. The group has held discussions to understand what women workers who engage in unpaid and paid labour define as ‘change’ in their lives, how they want to participate in creating change, and what CSOs can do to improve their accountability towards women workers.

Our Work, Our Lives, a monthly E-Magazine, was born out of those discussions. We published it on the last day of every month from [August 2021 to March 2022](#). Each issue took up a simple theme that resonated with the everyday lives of low-wage women workers, their joys, sorrows, struggles, and most importantly, their agendas for change. We are resuming publication of the e-magazine from March 2023 as a bi-monthly.

While this English language E-Magazine acts as a bridge among CSO colleagues (and the few workers who can communicate in English) in different countries, each group creates publications in their own language. Where the workers have no formal literacy, they use other innovative techniques. GAATW Secretariat does all it can to democratise digital technology and facilitate knowledge building and sharing from the ground up.

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Issue 10, Women Workers Organise

Dear friends,

We are pleased to bring you the May 2023 issue of **Our Work, Our Lives** which focusses on women workers' organising.

In this issue we hear from community organisers and union leaders affiliated to AMKAS-Nepal, ARM-Lebanon, CHRCD-Sri Lanka, DoWan-Sierra Leone, ESCO-Sri Lanka, JALA PRT- Indonesia, OKUP-Bangladesh, OPSI-Indonesia, Tarangini-Nepal, WINS-India, WOFOWON-Nepal, MAP-Thailand, PTS-India and Yasanti-Indonesia.

Women who have returned after working as domestic workers (or in other low waged jobs) in foreign countries have collectivised to demand stronger social protection and a safe and fair labour migration regime. They are currently self-employed or working as daily wage labourers in their home countries. Even when there are accusations from male family members that they are 'wasting time in girly gossip', returnee women migrants have sought out each other's company. Many of them have also enjoyed working in their communities. "I joined DoWan to avoid loneliness at home and get skills training to find a job," says Kadiatu Patricia Ado from Sierra Leone. "Earlier I was known as someone's daughter, sister, wife, or mother. Now I am a well-known face in my community, even in my district. I am one of the trusted persons in my society," says Indira Kharel from AMKAS-Nepal.

“Despite lack of recognition from the government, we have been able to create a culture of mutual support amongst ourselves and find a social niche for ourselves,” members of the Kurunegala Migrant Societies tell us.

There are stories of organising and unionising from women domestic workers, home-based workers, porters, entertainment workers, farmers, and sex workers. “When we started speaking as a group, things did change sometimes. Not big changes but at least the behaviour of male colleagues and employers changed a little. When we started to respect ourselves, we noticed that people also treated us with some respect in public places,” Ayushma KC, an entertainment worker leader from WOFOWON tells us. Erna Maria from Jogja City Homeworkers Federation explains that by joining the union, she learnt about workers’ rights and how to fight for it. Her words are echoed by members of the women farmers’ cooperative in Tirupati, India who say, “We thought that if we present our situation to policy makers as a group, there is greater possibility of being taken seriously.”

The interview-based essays in this issue are a testimony to the determination and commitment of worker organisers and leaders. “We do not count how many hours we work. Sometimes, we start in the morning and go on until night. Women workers call us whenever they need to”, says Palaniammal from PTS-Tamilnadu. Her words resonate in all other stories. The organisers build relationships with fellow workers that go beyond their work lives. Further, as male family members often discourage or even forbid women workers to collectivise, leaders also work with men and explain the benefits. Obviously, concrete changes, however small, strengthen groups.

We are grateful to our sisters for sharing the successes, challenges and most importantly, the strategies and methodologies of organising. As in previous issues, these simple but powerful stories aim to foster mutual learning and strengthen solidarity among groups of workers and organisers.

We hope you feel inspired by the stories shared by our sisters.

Do write to us with your comments, suggestions, or stories for upcoming issues at bandana@gaatw.org

Warmly

GAATW-IS team



Women Workers Organise

Women Workers Forum in Chitwan

AYUSHMA KC, DOHORI SINGER, PAHICHAN SANJAL CO-CORDINATOR

I am Ayushma KC. I have been a Dohori Singer for 8 years. I have been part of the the Women Forum for Women in Nepal (WOFOWON) for more than 3 years. In April 2021, I participated in a 4-days leadership training organised by WOFOWON in Kathmandu and was appointed as the Co- Coordinator from Chitwan district.

Before the training I was not aware of my rights as a worker. I had my own personal problems and all I wanted to do was to somehow earn a living. One day WOFOWON staff from Kathmandu visited my workplace in Chitwan. They were in Chitwan for a few days and met many workers at various entertainment venues. Some of us were invited to the



training in Kathmandu. Upon reaching their office I saw that women from other districts were also there for the training.

We were given an orientation on human rights, workers' rights and the importance of organising workers. Following the training and discussion sessions most of us felt that it is necessary to put our energy into organising workers in the entertainment sector nationwide. That was how the *Pahichan Sanjal* was formed.

WOFOWON was the first organisation to come and visit workers in the entertainment sector and find out about their working conditions. Although we liked it that they had come to visit us, initially we didn't take the discussion about organising seriously. We were not sure how we could form groups and whether anything would come out of these efforts. We had many problems and a lot of work too. And most of us had responsibilities at home. How will we find the time to organise? And will anything really change if we organise ourselves? We had our doubts. But the more we discussed about our bad working conditions and the social discrimination we faced, the more urgent the need for organising became. We were still not confident that any real change would happen, but we thought of trying.

Through the *Pahichan Sanjal*, workers from different districts got an opportunity to connect with each other. We got to know about each other's workplace environment. Most of us were completely ignorant about the labour laws of the country. None of us had the courage to speak up in front of our employers. We did not have any negotiation skills. One training was not enough. In fact, after the *Sanjal* was formed, we had a few more trainings. Some in-person and some on-line. Slowly, we developed confidence and self-esteem. Earlier, whenever we talked to each other

we only used to discuss personal matters. Sometimes we used to talk about the problems at workplace, but we never had the courage to even imagine positive changes in our work life. But when we started speaking as a group, things did change sometimes. Not big changes but at least the behaviour of male colleagues and employers changed a little. When we started to respect ourselves, we noticed that people also treated us with some respect in public places.

But the pandemic was a tough challenge for us. Many of us lost our jobs. When entertainment venues started to reopen, the employers increased working hours but not the salary. As a leader, I am responsible for supporting and helping other workers as well. But once I was thrown out of my job for 3 months because the employer accused me of misleading the workers and teaching them to form a 'gang'. That was what he called our *Sanjal!*

So, ups and downs have continued to happen in the last three years. Right now, some employers are providing ID cards and basic services to the workers. During our 16-days campaign against Gender Based Violence, we demanded that our workplace should be a 'safe space during menstruation'. We demanded clean washrooms and adequate breaks for women. We were happy that many employers supported us in this campaign, and some even supported our network financially. I, along with my other network friends, have been in coordination with local government officials, INGOs, NGOs, and trade unions, and we have developed a close friendship with several people.

Now that I have got the opportunity to work as the focal person of WOFOWON in my district, I am very busy with organising and awareness raising work. Most

workers are very enthusiastic to become part of the *Sanjal*. Last year, we worked on a photo-story collection to do public advocacy. The exhibition was very well appreciated in Kathmandu. This is both an exciting and challenging job for me. But I am confident that sooner or later things will change for the better for workers in the entertainment sector. And I will be able to contribute to those changes.



Courtesy: [Women Forum for Women in Nepal](#)

Translation by Manila Shakya, WOFOWON

Organising as Survivors

MEMBERS OF THE DOMESTIC WORKERS ADVOCACY NETWORK
(DOWAN), SIERRA LEONE

KADIATU PATRICIA ADO

I joined DoWAN

- To empower myself so that I can be useful in society; as lots of people including my family humiliated me every day because, I returned home and I was not in good condition.
- To avoid loneliness at home.
- To work with other survivors and do advocacy so that human trafficking can be stopped.
- To get skills training and find employment for myself.

VICTORIA A KARGBO

DoWAN has had a huge influence on my life since I came back home after a bad migration experience in Lebanon.

- I have gained experience on how to work with a group to achieve set goals.
- I have also received skills training in tailoring, bead designing and weaving.
- I have learnt farming activities



ISATU ISHA BANGURA

I would like to share a story about our group.

Some time ago we organised a football match competition between Migrants FC VS Mothers Club FC which took place at Mabarie village (a community where we do our farming activities). There were prizes for the winners of the football match competition. When the day arrived, we went to the community for the game. Everyone was excited. Before the game started, our coach called the team to attention and selected some players to go for the first 45 minutes. I was not included among the players. Some of my colleagues made fun of me and said, “You don’t know how to play football.” But I believed in myself and stayed cool.

The game started at 5: 30 pm. The first 45 minutes ended with no goal scored by our team. I told my coach that I wanted to play during the second half. She asked me

to stay quiet and assured me that I would be called upon at the right time. The game continued and they spent another 40 minutes with no goal scores. Everyone lost hope and said, “We are not going to win the match.” I got up and asked the coach to let me go and she finally agreed and sent me to the pitch. Guess what happened? I was fortunate to score a goal in the remaining 3 minutes and all our supporters were jubilant. People started dancing with me. I smiled and cried at the same time. I cherish that moment when everyone cheered for me.

KADIATU TARAWALIE

Let me tell you how we organise ourselves:

- We are a new group. Many of us have experience of abuse. We learn to trust ourselves and each other.
- We tell our stories and work on changing our stories.
- We agree to collaborate and cooperate with each other.
- We form Mothers’ Clubs in communities. These are mothers of young women who have migrated or are likely to migrate. We involve the mothers in our activities. By being with us the mothers are able to understand the dreams of their young daughters. By getting information from us they are able to share it with their daughters. Sometimes we are able to help them get information about their daughters who are in other countries.

Courtesy: [The Domestic Workers Advocacy Network \(DoWan\)](#),

Sierra Leone



Jogja City Women Homeworkers Federation's Experience

ERNA MARIA MAGDALENA ERNAWIDIASTUTI, CHAIR OF THE JOGJA CITY
WOMEN HOMEWORKERS FEDERATION

Jogjakarta City is a well-known tourist destination of Indonesia. Malioboro is an area of the city frequented by tourists and locals alike because of the beautiful handicraft shops. The shops sell a wide range of Indonesian handicrafts made with local raw materials. Not many know, however, that these much-loved products are produced by home based women workers who are paid very low wages. Neither their employers nor the state offers them health and social security protection. Yasanti (Yayasan Annisa Swasti) is a women's organisation and the first organisation to provide assistance and organising support to women home-based workers in Yogyakarta and Central Java since 2012. Yasanti encourages women homeworkers to unionise.

Erna Maria Magdalena Ernawidiastuti, (56), is currently the chairperson of the Jogja City Women Homemaker Federation. She has been producing various made-to-order handicrafts since 2000. She became a member of the women homeworkers' union in her area in 2017. Erna is a single parent now with 3 children. Two of her children are already working and the youngest son has just graduated from high

school. She lives in Ledok Tukangan Village, not far from the tourist center of Malioboro.

Below is an interview with Erna conducted by Dewi Nova of GAATW-IS.

How did you join the union?

My friends and I in our village have been making various handicrafts since 2000. At that time, my husband was also receiving orders from government offices to make batik maps. The area where we live is close to Malioboro and some people had businesses in leather products. We were asked to make bracelets from leftover leather products which could be sold in Malioboro. Initially, making these products on small orders was like a hobby. We did not have to leave home. It did not matter when and for how long we worked because we were paid per piece. My children were small, so it was a convenient arrangement. Thus, without realising it, I became a home-based worker.

In 2017 Ima from Yasanti started visiting us. Ten of us from our village used to meet her regularly and discuss many things. Ima explained to us that women like us are home-based workers. She also told us that such workers are there in many parts of the world. We found it strange but very interesting when she said that we had rights as workers, and we must fight to claim those rights.

After many months of discussion, in October 2017, we formed a women homeworkers' union in our area. We named it Serikat Ibu Merdeka (the Union of Independent Mothers). Soon after that, the Jogja City Women Homeworkers' Federation was formed bringing together five unions in neighbouring areas. When

we had our first election a year later, I got elected as the secretary of the federation. Three months later I was asked to replace the federation chairperson. It was sad that our elected federation chairperson's husband forbade her to continue her activities in the federation.

What did you learn by joining the union?

By joining the union, I learnt about workers' rights and how to fight for it. As these rights are denied to a large number of workers, the fights also need to be collective ones. That is why I joined the union and stayed with it.

What is the situation of women home-based workers in Jogja City and how do they keep their unions strong?

Most women homeworkers are working-class housewives. They are usually very busy with their daily household tasks. They take up orders to make handicraft items only because it is an opportunity to add a little to their family's income. A little money to give some nice things to the children. Some extra money that they save little by little to buy a household item. But this is not a long-term guaranteed income. Trends change. One item that is popular today is replaced by something new. The number of workers can increase so wages may get lower rather than higher.

The Unions

Initially, we made leather bracelets. Then we received an order from the Sofie Martin company to make packaging boxes for jewelry and watch cases. We also started making golf gloves. That is the situation at Serikat Bunda Merdeka (Merdeka Mother Union).

In Taunan area, mothers make *jumputan* (tie & dye cloth) for one entrepreneur. They have named themselves Serikat Bunda Mulia (Noble Mothers Union). In Prenggan area, mothers produce masks, tote bags and wallets. Their union is called Serikat Mutiara Bunda (Pearl Union). In Cokro area, mothers make sausages for the surrounding entrepreneurs. Their union is called Serikat Sekar Melati (Blooming Jasmin Union). In Notoprajan area, mothers receive orders to cook food. They have organised themselves as Serikat Harapan Bunda (Hope Mothers Union). Most Union members in Notoprajan area are aged 55 and above. During the pandemic, many of them started selling food directly as orders from entrepreneurs went down.

Each union has its own management structure. But the general rules and values are the same. Each union has monthly meetings, and each of them must send 3 representatives to the management group of the federation at the Jogja City level. The total number of members in these 5 unions is 108. We maintain good communication between the unions and the federation. The Jogja City Women Homeworkers' Federation and the Bantul Women Homeworkers' Federation form a federation at the provincial level, the Jogja Province Women Homeworkers' Federation.

Can you share an example of something you could do as an organised group? What are the challenges you face? How do you manage those challenges?

We conducted education sessions for union members so that we could prepare a draft of local regulation for the protection of informal workers. In our regular meetings, we discussed the challenges that homeworkers faced and how regional

regulation could be beneficial for us. Then we started to lobby the people's representative council and our provincial government.



We also lobbied with the local governments and city governments so that they are aware of the existence of the unions. Now the union has been registered at the Manpower Office of the Jogja City government as well as in each local government where we live. On behalf of our unions we participate in the annual development planning in each area. We get access to government assistance for workers. For example, we could access the financial management training for small businesses organised by the government. We also got training on basic food hygiene during the pandemic. We have also succeeded in getting subsidies from members of the House of Representatives and CSR funds of companies in the City of Jogja to pay BPJS Employment premiums. BPJS is a Social Security Administering Body, a special

institution tasked with administering health and employment insurance for the community, civil servants, and private employees.

Through the union we are also trained in negotiation skills to fight for a living wage with our employers.

I think our toughest challenge comes from our families. Not all members are supported by their families. Some parent-in-laws and husbands consider union activities to be a waste of time, unimportant and not profitable. Therefore, it is also important for unions to work with the families of their members. It is not enough if only the worker understands about the need for collective struggle and bargaining. We live within a patriarchal system so it is not possible for women to go against their families. We need to step up our work with the families and explain to them why unions are needed.

Courtesy: The Jogja Women Homeworkers Federation

Interview and translation by Dewi Nova, GAATW-IS

Our Migrant Associations in Batticaloa

EASTERN SELF-RELIANT COMMUNITY AWAKENING COMMUNITY ORGANISATION (ESCO)

We are all returnee migrant women from eight neighbouring villages in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka. Some years ago, with support from ESCO, a local NGO, we had formed (returnee) Migrant Associations at village level. As members of the Associations, we sometimes held meetings or participated in trainings organised by ESCO. We also talked to each other via phone. One day during our discussions we came to know about a family in which a woman who had returned from overseas migration was facing violence on a daily basis. She was being severely beaten by her husband and on the brink of suicide. Their neighbours were reluctant to intervene because they thought it



was a family issue. After further discussions, we learnt that such cases are not very uncommon. We thought that our Migrant Associations should raise their voices against the problems that some returnee women are facing. So, we formed a team consisting of 30 members from eight Migrant Associations in Batticaloa.

We had migrated abroad as housemaids to meet the economic needs of our families. Many of us had sold or mortgaged our land, jewelry and valuables and paid the agents who assisted us in going abroad. We had worked hard there and put up with many difficulties just to earn some money. But upon return we notice that our society looks down upon us and sometimes even our family members ill-treat us.



We started a regular session in our group called 'Tea Cup'. The sessions were held at the residence of our colleagues. We openly and deeply shared our experiences without judging ourselves or others. Those sessions strengthened the bonds among us and helped us make some plans.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, our regular meetings were disrupted. By the time Covid-19 restrictions were being eased, our country got hit with political and economic crisis.

Now there is a wave of desperate migration from our communities. People do not see any other alternative for survival, so they are taking desperate steps to migrate. They don't care to check if there is a proper contract or not. We have gone through three decades of civil war and then the post war period of struggles. The current situation once again creates chaos, hopelessness, and frustration. We feel lost.

In such a situation our group gives us some solace. We have stepped up our community work on safe migration. Those among us who are older and can't migrate anymore and those who have been able to set up some local businesses are trying to take collective responsibility to keep an eye on the small children of migrating women. We think that we can put some social pressure on the fathers to look after the children well and make sure that they do not neglect the health and education of children. This is a very difficult time, and we can only meet the challenges if we are together.

*Based on a group conversation with members of the group and ESCO colleagues.
Translation by Monica Alfred.*

Nothing can stop me now

INDIRA PRASAI KHAREL, AMKAS MORANG

I am a returnee migrant worker and I have been working with other returnee women since 2011. When I was working as a migrant worker abroad, I never thought of forming or joining a group. When I returned, I started working with an organisation working for female migrant workers. After returning to Nepal, I did not think about becoming part of an organised group immediately. But when I met other sisters at AMKAS-Nepal where we talked about challenges faced by returnee women, I felt inspired to start a branch in Morang. I felt that returnee women should join hands with each other to bring their issues to the government. We migrate to work in other countries to support our families. What we earn contributes to the foreign currency reserve of the country. Our contribution meets the urgent needs of our families. But we do not earn so much that we can just retire in comfort in Nepal. Many of us still need support from the state. One person's voice can be ignored. But our collective voice has a better chance of being heard. That is one of the main reasons behind our organising.

There are other reasons too. As returnee women many of us face stigma and rejection from families and communities. Sometimes even violence. As a group we support each other. We also provide help, assistance and advice to fellow returnees. We conduct awareness programmes to promote independence and self-employment for women in different parts of the country and sometimes offer trainings in small business management.

I always had a desire to work in the community. Just working in the house and looking after my family was not enough for me. I think I am a born leader. Living and working in another country is a valuable experience. I met people from other countries. I experienced new cultures, ate different kinds of food and learnt new languages. I gained confidence. Upon return, I wanted to share my experience with younger people in my community. Uma Didi (Elder Sister) the Chairperson of AMKAS-Morang and I work together in the community. I think people respect us and consult us on many matters. Earlier I was known as someone's daughter, sister, wife or mother. Now I am a well-known face in my community, even in my district. I am one

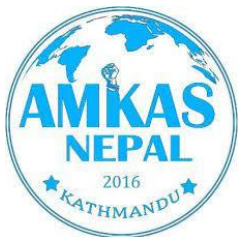


of the trusted persons in my society. Before joining the group, I used to feel shy and nervous even in front of a small group. But now I am capable of speaking in big meetings. Listening to the life stories of my sisters makes me understand the unfair ways of this world. In our group we discuss many problems that we women face. The trainings which we receive make us aware about our rights and dream a world where women can enjoy their rights and a world free of exploitation.



As an organisation, we wanted to organise trainings for returnee women. For that, we need financial support from the government. But government support will not come to informal groups. So we registered our organisation. Now we are a government recognised group. I think this is an achievement for us. Working as a network with the local government, CSOs and other stakeholders amplifying migrant voices and demands is making us stronger.

Challenges remain. Managing home and our organisational work is not easy. There are always people to make nasty and hurtful comments and discourage us. But nothing will stop me from achieving my goal to ensure a safer migration for all.



Courtesy: Aaprabasi Mahila Kamdar Samuha (AMKAS), Morang

Our Women Farmers' Cooperative

KRANTHI KUMARI, INDUPRIYA, SRIDEVI, DEVAKIDEVI, CHANDRAMMA AND ARUNA

We are a collective of small groups of women who have come together to form a Women Farmers Organisation exclusively for scheduled caste and tribes. Our groups comprise small landholders and landless farm labourers. The groups are a little over three years old. So, we are quite new to organising. We are from remote and far-flung villages. We have never been to high school. Only Kiran Kumari, the President of our group, has some formal education. She is a daughter-in-law of our village.

We decided to form groups for the following reasons:

A single person (in our case, a woman) has limited capacity, if she demands something, she will not be seen, heard or noticed. People will just ignore her. But if a group of people facing the same challenges unite themselves, they can bring change for the whole group. We thought that if we present our situation to policy makers as a group, there is greater possibility of being taken seriously.

But what kind of a group do we want to form? In our discussions, the analogy of families came up many times. We know that if there is a crisis in a supportive family, all family members discuss the problem together and plan to solve it. They have some form of basic understanding amongst themselves. But in a family that does not know



how to discuss things with each other, only some people get to decide things. Others may not say anything, but they grumble and complain privately and stay unhappy. We thought that within our group, there should be a culture of discussion and an agreed-upon decision-making structure.

We also talked about political parties. Most political parties that we know of are hierarchical and centered around power and control. Once the leader gets elected,

he or she rarely asks or consults others. They forget their promises and ignores the comment of people in opposition. His own party members become only puppets to agree to everything he says or does. We did not want that kind of a structure.

As marginal farmers and farm labourers, improving our economic situation is one of our main goals. So we wanted to learn how to set up a cooperative model of business. We wanted to learn how to do business as a collective. In order to manage farmers' cooperatives, we need to learn to take a decision with consensus. We need to be good organisers. Further, it is not enough to consult only the Board of Directors of the Cooperative. While the Directors can take decisions on behalf of the whole group, information should be shared with all members in a timely manner.

We rented an office space and used it for having weekly meetings. Many women farmers come to the meetings and talk about their produce, their businesses, and also about their family issues. New ideas are discussed, and information is passed among group members. We get tips about pricing and loan management. We learn about curbing the moneylender's menace and avoiding huge interest rates. These meetings are very practical and sometimes we have been able to achieve something. For example, we received tenancy rights card for three women. That was a great achievement.

As women we face problems in our domestic and personal lives. Some problems are difficult to talk about. We suffer alone and find no solutions, but here in our group, when we share our problems with others, we feel light and relieved. Our friends give us strength.



As a group, we are new. Our development will be dependent on the skill sets we develop and utilise.

Our group should include women cutting across caste/sub-caste and religion. The fact that we are working class should create solidarity among us. Farming is a broad area, perhaps we should include craftswomen and traditional artisans as they have different kinds of skill sets which can aid the progress of the group.

We can steer our agendas for change only by building groups based on our feminist understanding of supporting each other, decision-making by consensus and shared leadership.



Meeting facilitation and translation of notes by R Meera of Women's Initiatives (WINS), India



Why and How we Organised?

MEMBERS OF THE MIGRANT SOCIETIES IN KURUNEGALA DISTRICT, SRI LANKA

We are a group of women who have come together to form migrant societies. So why did we think of forming these societies? Centre for Human rights and Community Development (CHRCDD), a local NGO, has been working with women who had migrated and returned to Sri Lanka. As returnee migrant women in the village, we were somewhat curious and wanted to know more about their programmes. So we participated in some meetings. There we got some information on safe migration, and some skills on how to deal with problems faced by migrants upon return. We learnt about our rights and were encouraged to demand our own rights. Thus 25 Migrant Societies were established in selected divisions in Kurunegala District. Some of us came forward as leaders to coordinate various activities of the Societies.



Initially it was not easy for us to establish ourselves as Societies. Some returnee migrants were reluctant to get involved, others did not bother much about it, some were critical and discouraged others and few people even asked if the village needed an extra Society. Even we who were enthusiastic, got a little worried as we had never heard of Migrant Societies before. As migrants, we knew of not only isolation but also the daily refusals we face when seeking government assistance. On one hand the government called us 'heroes of the country' because we earn more than 50% of the country's foreign currency. But when we talked about our rights we were treated as 'forgotten' citizens.

It was also unfortunate to live with the feeling that no one in the village will stand up for our rights or help solve our problems unless something serious happens. Many villagers think that we are better off than them because we went abroad and earned more than them. Some villagers assume that we have solved all our problems by going abroad for work. What hurts us most is the removal of our names from the list of government aid schemes without investigating our current economic situation.

So we were happy and eager to create the Migrant Societies that would take up our issues.

We visited the migrant families in our villages, encouraged them and helped them recruit fellow migrants. Soon the membership of the Migrant Societies increased. However, men were not so keen to join. We did not consider it a problem as most of the people who migrate abroad for jobs from our villages are women.

Some of the challenges we often face as leaders are the questions and expectation of members about the benefits they would receive from the Societies. We wanted to become a formal Society but we still have not been able to register under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Foreign Employment Agency. Furthermore, the government's lack of accountability towards us is the main reason for members losing interest in the Migrant Societies.



Still we don't give up. Sharing the success stories of members always encourages and empowers other members. For example, one leader shared how they took immediate steps to help a woman to return home from abroad when her husband

was seriously ill. Another leader shared how they took steps to provide entrepreneurship training to improve the economic situation of the members of the Society. One of our Societies has taken the initiative to help school children of in-service migrants and make sure that they do not neglect their education.

Thus, taking the triumphs, failures, and the learnings as our stepping-stones, we have come together as a team. Despite lack of recognition from the government, we have been able to create a culture of mutual support amongst ourselves and find a social niche for ourselves. We are still waiting for the government's approval of our Migrant Societies as registered organisations. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic that devastated our lives, our country faced an economic collapse. Today politically, economically and socially we have experienced a major setback. As the main breadwinners of families, even women who thought they would not migrate again, are trying to find opportunities abroad. As leaders, we have a big responsibility now. We need to step-up our awareness programmes so women do not take unsafe means to migrate out of desperation.

Courtesy: Migrant Societies

Translation by Monica Alfred

Our Women Migrants Forum

MIGRANT FORUM MEMBERS FROM MUNSHIGUNJ

A large number of returnee migrant workers, in collaboration with OKUP, have organised themselves as a Migrant Forum. The Forum which consists of returnee men, women and members of their families was formed in 2013. Forum members are present in many districts of Bangladesh.

In mid-2021, OKUP organised a group discussion with 21 women members of the Migrant Forum at their Munshiganj Field Office. The women took a decision to form a special group of Women Migrants Forum, a sub-group within the larger group.

Why a Sub-Group?

When a woman migrant worker returns from abroad with a bad experience, physical harm or illness, instead of being consoled and cared for she is reprimanded by her family and society as a whole. Women often do not find a suitable place to share their stories and get some practical advice or moral support. Many women returnees had a long-cherished dream to establish a platform where they could share their stories and find strength from each other. The women also thought that they could create common interest groups within their group and pursue their goals to learn something or start some small enterprises.

Further, the women wanted to use their lived experiences to raise awareness among migrating women. They also wanted to advocate for their own rights both at home and abroad. They wanted to highlight the discrimination against women in society

and non-recognition of women's work. They wanted to educate themselves about their role in changing patriarchal attitudes and to be informed about various contemporary issues. Thus, the Women Migrants Forum was formed in 2021 with the leadership of some active members from the existing Migrants Forum. All members were returnees.



How do the women participate in the forum?

Women get involved in this Forum in different ways. Several women returnees who have experienced abuse get support from OKUP. They attend various meetings of OKUP and express interest to join the forum. Many feel that being part of the forum

gives them a new identity, a more respectable one than that of an abused returnee in need of support.

Topics of Discussion

Since the inception of this forum, discussion on many specific topics have taken place. Topics included rights of migrant workers, gender inequality, responsibilities, and duties for making migration safe, dreams of women migrants and public-private support services to fulfill the dreams. Women's sexual and reproductive health and rights have been discussed in detail. Members have received information about the socio-economic opportunities available to them and enhanced their skills in certain areas. They have also disseminated the information they received in their communities.

Challenges

It has not been easy. The women had to face many questions from family members and community people about this forum. People were curious, even nosy, and often disapproving: “Why do you go there? What is the benefit? Are you getting a job? How much money are you making? If there is no money, don’t waste your time. Oh, is it just to gossip with other women? Or is there any other plan? Why don’t you stay home and do some work!”

The women were determined and did not pay much attention to these comments.



Here is Dalia's story:

I have been part of the Women Migrant Forum for the last few months. Within this short time, I have helped 3 women in availing their old age allowance by contacting the authorities. In April, police arrested two lactating mothers (who were working in the factory as labourers) from Mali Pathar area of Panchasar Union on some fabricated charges. I took the two babies to the police station every day. After the mothers breast fed their babies, I brought them back home. Within 4 days, I got a lawyer who helped to release the women on bail. I forced the factory owner to go to the police station and explain that the women were not criminals. After this incident, I have become very popular in my area and people are even

encouraging me to contest in the upcoming local government election. I don't know if I will, but I really like doing community work. Right now, I am helping my neighbor to get his birth registration card from the union council office. I also assist the family members of dead migrant workers. Sometimes I help migrant workers to access Prabashi Kallyan Bank for loans.

Looking Forward

Operational Plan

1. We will be supportive towards each other. If there is any problem in someone's area, all the forum members will respond to her call.
2. We want to be seen as part of a group. So, if we wear the group tee-shirt given by OKUP, others will know us.
3. We will use IMO and WhatsApp to communicate among ourselves. Those who do not have smart phones will use regular phone calls.
4. Members of Women Migrants Forum will hold regular meetings with local government authorities to further enhance their work.
5. Working class people often face many kinds of social and political harassment. Being detained at the police station on false charges is common. Such cases spread panic in the area. Members of the Women Migrant Forum must prepare peaceful human chains and protest in public places when such unjust things happen.



Advocacy Plans

1. Women Migrant Forum members have decided to hold a press conference protesting the bribery demand by the officials of Prabashi Kallyan Bank in disbursing loans.

2. In the Mir Kadim area, a gang of brokers (sub-agent) has been very active in sending people to Dubai with tourist visas and false work contracts. Many are being abused. Some families have taken big loans and gone through many problems to bring back the victims. The women's forum members are preparing to submit a written complaint and memorandum on behalf of the affected people and their family members to the District Commissioner and later hold a press conference to raise awareness.

Courtesy: [Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program \(OKUP\)](#)

Meeting facilitation and translation by Hena Akter of OKUP

OKUP
a grassroot migrants' organization

Organising among Home Based Workers of Bantul Regency, Indonesia:

AN INTERVIEW WITH NUNIK KRISTIANA OF BANTUL WOMEN
HOMEWORKERS FEDERATION

Although the Government of Indonesia still does not recognise home based workers, they have started to organise themselves in unions and collectives. The women workers' federation of Bantul Regency in Jogjakarta Province is one of the organised groups. This federation consists of five unions spread over five villages. Yasanti, a women's group focusing on workers' rights plays a strong and supportive role in organising women workers in Jogjakarta and Central Java.

Women from Bawuran and neighbouring villages in the hilly regions take up different kinds of home-based production work. Nunik Kristiana is the elected Chair of the Bantul Women Homeworkers Federation, which manages five unions of women workers in five villages. Her husband works in a cement company. They have 3 children, the youngest one being a toddler. As the Chair, Nunik is responsible to strengthen the unions and motivate the members to continue their struggle for recognition as workers and demand protection of their rights.

The following is an interview with Nunik by Dewi Nova of GAATW-IS.

How did you start organising yourselves?

In the village where I live and in the neighbouring villages, many women, including myself, work from home and make different kinds of products. We receive orders from the skippers in Jogjakarta City, which is about 1.5 hours away by motorbike. Some of us sew wallets, bags or garments. Some make fans from bamboo while others prepare crackers from the *melinjo* fruit. Some sisters make shadow puppets from cowhide. Silver crafts are also another popular item. I make bags from batik and denim cloth.

I came to know about the women homeworkers' union in 2016. At that time, my friends and I joined the union in Wonolelo, a neighbouring village, because there was no union in our village. As our village also had many home-based workers, we set up our own union after a few months. I took the initiative to start our union. Currently, our village union has 40 members.

In addition to the old union in Wonolelo, now Bawuran, Bangun Jiwo, Ukir Sari and Segoroyodo villages also have unions. There are 180 members in five unions. The chairs of each union and of the federation are elected by voting.

What attracted you to the union?

I wanted to learn how to negotiate for higher wages with the skippers and thought that they would listen to the demands of an organised group. I also wanted to be able to access government assistance programmes at the village, district and provincial levels.

What efforts have you and your friends made to attract women homeworkers to join unions?

We educate women home workers to see themselves as workers with rights. Wage hike is not our only demand, we also want the skippers to allow more time to complete the work. Yasanti helps us to negotiate wages with skippers.

We think of different strategies to address the economic needs of our members. *Arisan* is one such strategy. Each member contributes a certain amount of money per month. If there are 12 members in a group, the collection is done for 12 months. Every month there is a lottery. The winning amount goes to union members who are sick or if there is a death in the family or an emergency need.

What are your current advocacy priorities?

We were successful in our lobby with the village government to recognise the existence of women home workers' unions through a decree. In 2017, five unions received decrees from their village heads. The village government welcomes the unions because they think of it as a group that not only works to earn money but also helps each other through *arisan* and other initiatives.

This recognition from the village government was important because on behalf of the unions we could be involved in the development planning of our own villages. So, we could push for allocation of budgets to meet specific needs of women. We received a subsidy of IDR 5,100,000 (approximately 350 USD) for union meetings for a year. We also allocated budget for advanced sewing training for 15 union

members. The village government often requests us to exhibit our products at provincial fairs.

While we were accepted quite easily by our village government, recognition at the federation level was not easy. In 2018, our federation was registered with the Manpower Office of Bantul Regency Government. The district administration wanted us to collect data on the number of women homeworkers, type of work they do, and data about the skippers and product centres. They also wanted all our details including our mobile phone numbers.

After our registration at the manpower office, we should have been able to access training programmes to improve our skills and get loans for working capital from the district government. But our skippers have not yet provided us with the occupational health and safety training that they had promised. Nor the skills training in screen printing that we had requested for.

At the Jogjakarta provincial level, the Bantul Women Homeworkers Federation merged with the Jogja City Women Homeworkers Federation to become the Joint Federation of the Jogjakarta Provinces Women Homeworkers. We then joined JAMPI (*Jaringan Advokasi Melindungi Pekerja Informal* Advocacy Network for Protection of Informal Workers) which is an alliance of organisations of domestic workers, *buruh gendong* (women porters) and homeworkers.

JAMPI fights for BPJS premiums (Social Security Administering Body, which is a special institution tasked with administering health and employment insurance for the community, civil servants, and private employees). We demand that the



Collaboration on employment health checks for homeworkers and women porters as a result of our advocacy for health insurance protection with the Yogyakarta Province Manpower Office.

Employment BPJS of Rp. 16,500/month should be paid by the state. When we asked the skipper to pay the premium as our employer, they just stopped giving us work. Our advocacy for BPJS premium has not been successful. The provincial government allocates Employment BPJS funds for formal workers, not informal ones like us.

What was the toughest challenge you faced in your federation and how did you deal with it?

It is really sad that when we recruit members, some women workers taunt us and ask, "How much money do you get by joining the union?" They refuse to understand that this is a collective struggle for rights.

Sometimes there are unions whose members are not very active. As a person who built the union from scratch, I feel very sad when members do not take their responsibility seriously. Sometimes I go to the members in person to really

understand what problems they as union members are facing. I also try to understand the inter-personal dynamic among members.

If we want our members to be active in the union, we as leaders need to be responsive to their daily difficulties. Be it emergency needs for financial support or addressing problems of domestic violence, if the union does not stand behind the members, they will not have a sense of belonging. Our federation runs a collective enterprise selling basic necessities such as rice, oil, sugar and other essential grocery. The price in the federation shop is cheaper than in the market and members can buy on credit and pay at the end of the month. We also start collective businesses to enhance the income of our members. For example, we have a cloth store for our members that sells special clothes for Muslim women.

What are the things that excite you about organising workers?

My happiest moment is when members of the home-based union join with *buruh gendong* (women porters) and domestic workers to commemorate May Day and Human Rights Day at the provincial level. This commemoration is usually supported by Yasanti. At this event, we also open a bazaar for various kinds of products made by members. We hold meetings of each group and inter-sectoral meetings to identify common concerns for joint advocacy.

Courtesy: Bantul Women Homeworkers Federation
Interview and translation by Dewi Nova, GAATW-IS

I Like Challenging Work!

AN INTERVIEW WITH PALANIAMMAL, PEN THOZHILALARGAL SANGAM (PTS-WOMEN WORKERS UNION) FROM TAMILNADU, INDIA

Penn Thozhilargai Sangam (PTS-Women Workers Union) is an independent trade union of women workers working in the unorganised and organised sectors in Chennai, Chengalpattu, Thiruvallur and Kanchipuram districts of Tamil Nadu, India. PTS currently has a membership of more than 35,000 women workers.

Palaniammal is a human rights and labour rights activist from Tamil Nadu, India. She began her work by investigating cases of human rights violation by state authorities and succeeded in securing justice for many people. She has been part of PTS for the last five years and has tirelessly worked to hold the state and the employers accountable. Palani enjoys the challenges of her work. R Sumathi and Palani are the leaders of Pen Thozhilalargal Sangam (PTS-Women Workers Union) and Garment and Fashion Workers Union (GAFWU) Union.



The following interview with Palani was conducted over Zoom by Bandana Pattanaik from GAATW-IS.

Village
committee
meeting at
Anandapuram



Which groups of women workers do you work with?

We work with domestic workers, street vendors, garment workers, construction workers, and workers in small factories. Women take up many kinds of jobs in the unorganised sector and we try to unionise them so they can demand their rights to decent work.

We work in four districts of Tamil Nadu; Chennai, Thiruvallur, Chengalpattu and Kanchipuram.

Why should women workers organise?

The unorganised sector in our country is very large and many women work in this sector. They do not have social security and their rights are not protected. It is really necessary to work with them so that they can demand their rights as a group. As you know, India still does not have a law on domestic work. Organising among domestic workers has gotten stronger over the years and many groups are lobbying for a national legislation. Still there is no law yet. However, PTS has had a success at the state level.

In 2018, the government of Tamil Nadu passed an order specifying the minimum wage, working hours, leave, increment, and bonus for domestic workers. I would say all credit for it goes to the workers of PTS. It is their strong advocacy that made this possible.



PGL Company workers meeting

The first step for us is worker education. That is how we start. It is a continuous process. It takes time. It is important that workers must see themselves as workers.



Protest against 12 hours of work

In the case of domestic workers, the women used to think that they are doing what all women do at home; washing clothes, cleaning the house, and doing dishes. It took many trainings to make them see themselves as workers. Slowly a small group of workers started negotiating with their employers, then others joined. They started demanding their rights from the government too. The government order of 2018 gave them a big boost. Education, protest and demand do not stop. The workers' advocacy for ratification of ILO Conventions 189 and 190 is still on-going. The government does not seem interested, but we do not give up. We are a large group now. There are more than 35,000 women in PTS.

While domestic workers come from the unorganised sector, we also work with women workers in the export-oriented garment sector. It is traditionally an organised sector. More than 75% of workers in this sector are women. This sector has laws and regulations but those are not followed. The law says that workers should work for 8 hours, but there is compulsory overtime. Most of the workers work for 12 hours, they don't get a pay slip and the minimum wage remains at the same level for many years. As per the law, it should be revised every 5 years. We

filed a case because there was no pay revision after 2014. The companies also went to court. After a long struggle, the workers won. They got their lost wages and arrears. After continuous advocacy, in the districts where PTS works, the companies started giving pay slips with all details to workers.

You wanted to know why women workers should organise. Tell me, if they don't fight for their rights, then who will fight for them? And if they fight as a group, then there is a better chance of winning. Trade unions are there but most are very male-centred. That is why we had to create a women's trade union.



How do you organise the women workers? What is the process like?

We started with the unorganised sector in 2000 and with the organised sector in 2009. It is very difficult to organise women workers. Not only do they face problems in their workplaces, but they also have challenges within the family, especially with

their husbands. Our organisers have to visit them at home too. We need to work with families, most importantly with their husbands. Then men must understand why we are encouraging workers to organise and how it will benefit them. Otherwise, they will not let the women come for meetings and protests.

We meet the women workers every evening when they return home from work. We meet them on Sundays too. We take turns visiting the areas where workers live. Women are busy at home too. So, if they are doing some housework, we help them with it. If they are working in the field, we also join in the work. We do not count how many hours we work. Sometimes, we start in the morning and go on until night. Women workers call us whenever they need to. We make friends with them. We ask them questions about their work, about the pay slips, benefits etc. Initially, they don't talk about their personal problems. Then slowly as they start trusting us, we get to know about their family issues too. For example, we hear about their alcoholic husbands abusing them, the rising costs of living and many other problems.

We encourage the women to stand up to the men. When the men come to know about us, sometimes they try to harass us too. But we are not afraid. If domestic violence is not addressed through negotiation, we help the women to make police reports. Over the years, we have been able to change the behaviour of many men.

What changes have you seen over the years?

When we started, no one trusted us, no one was listening to us, no one was coming to the meetings. Actually, no one believed that anything would change. No one was coming for the protest marches. Slowly this started changing. Now before we go to

the meeting, the workers are there. They come to us. One WhatsApp message is enough. Thousands gather within an hour! That is the big change that I have seen.



Village committee meeting

You might think that the organised sector has a culture of protest and collective bargaining. But that is not true. The workers at the bottom of the ladder are often clueless about their rights. So, we started with them. When some cases we took up became successful, women started trusting us. Now they know everything about the laws and their rights. They tell us which act and which section of the legislation is being violated and how we can file cases. We have very active area leaders. If we create a culture of travel allowance and food, people will come only for that.

Another change that I have seen is recognition from government. There is a large area called Kallukutai, very close to Madras IIT. It is a disputed private land. The dispute is going on for the last 30 years. A large number of working-class people

have occupied the land and lived there. There are more than 5,000 workers in that area. The court ordered people to leave but they did not. The development schemes of the government do not reach there.

During a recent flood there was severe water logging in the area. PTS went there with ration and food. We held meetings and gave petitions. We invited political leaders. The timing helped. As it was election time, political parties competed with each other to show they are concerned about people's plights.

The AIDMK party came and built a road, after that the DMK party came and addressed other problems. Soon electricity was installed and water tanks brought drinking water. People were amazed. They had voted for various parties for the last 30 years, but no one had taken any action. The residents of Kallukutai realized the power of organising. They understood that organised workers can hold the people in power accountable. Of course, the government also came to know PTS!

How do you build grassroots leadership?

As I said, we organise per area. We look for committed, socially minded and strong women. Some women are timid and nervous. They may take more time to speak up. But some are very articulate and strategic. They are born leaders. We select one or two such women from each area and provide trainings to them. At the early stage of their work, they keep calling us and checking with us if the steps they take are correct or not. Sometimes they call us at night to ask questions and to clarify their doubts. We must be available for those discussions.

We build relationships with the workers and make sure that those taking up leadership roles stay accountable to others and practice democracy. Leaders must ensure that all workers should develop a sense of belonging to the union. Now we have 25 leaders. We talk to each other regularly. We need to relate to each other as human beings not just on our work issues. We discuss many things about our lives. Like I said, a women workers union needs to look at all aspects of life.



Consultation with Working group of Garments worker

How do you deal with societal discrimination?

Most of our organised workers are from the Dalit community. Especially in Kanchipuram and Chengalputtu area. Recently, a domestic worker came to me in the evening crying. She was slapped by her employer and abused with curse words. The employer was a doctor in a government hospital. The worker wanted to take the case to the court so I helped her do that. The case went on for a while. When



May 1, Labour Day Event

the doctor realised that this might create problems in her job, she and her husband apologized, offered money to the domestic worker, and requested her to withdraw the case. Initially, the worker was getting persuaded by her employers. But many members of the union joined her and explained that discrimination is a major social problem and they should take a stand against it as a union. So, the case was used as a lesson for other employers as well. Our members face multiple forms of discrimination on a daily basis. Do you know that Apps are used as surveillance measures too? So small examples of protest and resistance boost their confidence. Employers are careful these days. They know that their domestic worker is not

alone, there are thousands of other workers with her. The other day a middle-class woman from one of the large apartment complexes in town called me and said that she would like to help us. Upon checking I realised that she was impressed that her domestic worker belongs to a union.

So positive social change is happening. Slowly but surely. That is the power of organising.

Courtesy: Penn Thozhilalargai Sangam (PTS-Women Workers Union)

Interview by Bandana Pattanaik from GAATW-IS

The Buruh Gendongs; Organising for Change

AN INTERVIEW WITH PONIRAH, MUSINEM AND TRI

Buruh Gendong in Bahasa Indonesia means women who carry bags. It is a term used for women porters in wholesale traditional markets in a few cities of Indonesia.

The women carry the bags of customers and bring those to their car. They also off load goods of small businesses and bring it from the parking area to the shops. In the fruit market they can carry boxes of fruit weighing 50-90 kgs for a fee of Rp. 5000 (0.35 USD) per time. Their fee is very low, and they typically do not have any social security. Women porters are found in two areas of the Javanese sultanate in Indonesia, in Solo city of Central Java Province and in Jogjakarta city of Jogjakarta Province.

Women porters in Jogjakarta city have organised themselves. There are four groups in four traditional markets. Yasanti (Yayasana Annisa Swasti), a women's organisation has been supporting their organising efforts for many years.

Previously, there was research on the working and living conditions of women porters in the traditional market. Then it was followed up by raising awareness and organising at Beringharjo Traditional Market (Yasanti first organized women porters). Currently there are 4 markets organised by Yasanti (Beringharjo, Giwangan, Gamping and Kranggan traditional market).

The following is an interview with three members of the groups from Beringharjo Market, Gamping Market and Kranggan Market conducted by Dewi Nova from GAATW IS.

Ponirah (46), lives in Ngrandu village which is 30 kms away from the market where she works. She and her husband have a small business from home to make *wedang uwuh* (spicy healthy drink). They have three children two of whom have families of their own. Their youngest son just graduated from school and has started working. Her village has many women who work as porters in the Beringharjo market. Ponirah and her co-workers usually take an inter-city bus to commute to work. They leave home early in the morning and return late in the afternoon. Ponirah joined the Group in 2010. She has always been an active member of the group and sometime ago she was the elected leader of the group.

Musinem (58), lives in Sedayu, Bantul Regency which is 12 kms away from the market where she works. Her husband works as a motorcycle-taxi driver. They have 3 children who are married and have their own families. Musinem has 6 grandchildren. Musinem uses a motorbike, a gift from her son, to go to work. Currently, she is the Chairperson of the Women Porters Group in Gamping Market.

Tri Winarsih (40), lives in Tirtadi in Sleman Regency which is only 8 kms away from the market where she works. Her husband works in a company that sells farming equipment. They have two children who are 18 and 14 years old. Every day, Tri and her mother, who is also a woman porter, go to the market on a motorbike. Both of them work in a fruit market that is open for 24 hours. They leave home at

3.30 am and return at 9 am. Tri has been a member of the Gendong Pasar Kranggan Labor Association since 2014 and is currently the secretary of the group.

Dewi Nova: How did you become porters?

Ponirah: I have been working in Beringharjo Market since 1989. First, I worked in a kiosk selling Soto and meatballs. I worked there for 15 years. When my employer died, I started selling tea in the market. I stopped after two years because there were many women in that business and I wasn't making much money. My sister who worked as a porter, gave me a shawl to put on my shoulder which is a sign that you are a porter. "You go around the Batik area, someone may notice you and use your services," she said. That was how my life as a porter started. Now I work in the dry fruit and nuts area on the second floor of Beringharjo Market.

Musinem: I started working as a porter after I had three children. We were experiencing economic difficulties. My husband's income from selling newspapers was not enough for the family's needs. So my neighbour who was a porter suggested that I start work in the market.

Tri Winarsih: I am the 3rd generation porter in my family, after my grandmother and mother. Sani, my mother, is still working in the market. She is 65 years old. I have been a porter since 2014. I started helping my mother and then took it up as my work.

Kranggan Market where I work, is not as big as Beringharjo Market. Our market specialises in fresh produce such as vegetables, fruit, seafood, beef, chicken, etc. We

get a wage of Rp. 4000 (0.28 USD) to carry a box of fruits that may weigh 70 kg. Shoppers usually pay Rp. 5000 (0.35 USD) – Rp. 20,000 (1.38 USD) if I accompany them and carry their purchase while they are shopping. Sometimes I get a stingy person who pays me only Rp. 2000 (0.14 USD) for carrying their bags.

Dewi Nova: How did you join the Porters' Group?

Ponirah: A week after starting as a porter in 2020, Mbak Yatmi who was the chairperson of the Porters' Group talked to me. "Come on, join the group. You will be able to make many friends not just in the area where you work, but in the entire market," she said. Beringharjo Market is very large and divided into several areas based on the products. In one area usually there are there are 6 groups of porters. Later I met sisters from Yasanti. They invited me to join some trainings in which the need for organizing was discussed. We also got some basic trainings on how to look after our reproductive health. Mrs. Martini from Yasanti often asked me to take notes at the meetings because I am good at it and I also like doing it. I was elected as a leader of the group. Right now, I am not a leader but I still help with note-taking.

Musinem: I met Mbak Martini from Yasanti after the earthquake in Yogyakarta. At that time, Mrs. Martini invited me to organise women workers. Then I joined as a formal member.

Tri Winarsih: When I started working as a porter, my mother was already a member of the Porter Group in Kranggan Market. She took me to the monthly meetings and advised me to take a membership. I became a member of the group in December 2014. I am currently the Secretary of my group.

Dewi Nova: Why did you join the group?

Ponirah: I thought that by joining the group I would be able to make friends and learn new things from the trainings.

Musinem: I got interested to join the group because there are savings and loans schemes. At that time, I was paying for the schooling of 3 children, so instead of borrowing money from a loan shark or bank it was better to get it from the group. I have studied only up to primary school level. When I got trainings on negotiation skills, labour rights and reproductive health it felt as if I was continuing my schooling for free. I am currently the chairperson of the Gamping Market Women Porters Group.

Tri Winarsih: I was interested in joining the group because interest free loans at the time of need was a big advantage. We were donating and our money was rolling as an interest free loan.

Dewi Nova: When you got elected as leaders, what strategies did you and your friends use to organise your fellow workers?

Ponirah: To enthuse workers to join the group, we tell them about the benefits of membership such as participating in recitations, meetings and trainings, receiving free medical treatment and possibility of getting interest free loans at the time of need.

We work with the basic principle of helping each other. Each member makes a mandatory contribution of Rp. 2000 (0.14 USD) per month. This money becomes our savings and loans business capital.

Each member contributes Rp. 3000 (0.21 USD) per month to a health fund. We use this money for free medical expenses. Yasanti connects with health organisations and hospitals whose doctors can serve us for free. So, the health fund money goes for buying medicines. Periodically we get free check-ups for blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar and uric acid.

We contribute Rp. 2000 (0.14 USD) per month which we use for drinks and snacks during our meetings. We encourage our members to start small businesses on the side. Some of our members sell *wedang uwuh* (spicy healthy drink), snacks, or produce from the village such as bananas.

Musinem: To strengthen solidarity among members, I usually chat with the members during my free time. We have created a WhatsApp group for quick coordination. The elderly members do not use smart phones, so I go to visit them.

Tri Winarsih: Our market is small, there are only 35 women porters. All are members of the group.

Dewi Nova: What advocacy has been carried out by the group?

Ponirah: We had to fight the market managers to get free access to toilets. We could use the toilets in the market, but we had to pay Rp. 1000– 2000 every time

we went to the toilet. After much fighting, we now have only one toilet in the entire market which is free to use. We also fought for *sentong endong-endong* (a place to rest, change clothes and store things) and we have already got it. *Sentong endong-endong* is important for our privacy when changing clothes and resting. We also successfully fought for the use of the meeting room in the market. We can use the meeting room in the market free of cost for our meetings and trainings.

All the porters' groups from Jogja province went to the provincial government for regional regulation. The domestic workers and home-based workers joined us. We also lobbied for health insurance. Right now, the premium payments are low for us. We have also asked the government to extend trans-Jogja bus line to our villages because private bus tickets are expensive for us.

Musinem: Gamping Market is different from Beringharjo Market. Pasar Beringharjo is owned by the government, while Pasar Gamping belongs to the cooperatives. The price of stalls in Gamping Market is very expensive. One stall costs Rp. 1 billion. We can't get a resting room like our sisters at Pasar Beringharjo.

There are no free meeting rooms either. Currently we are allowed to use the mushola (a place for Muslims to pray) for our activities. We give a cleaning fee of Rp. 25,000 (1.73 USD) to the musholla manager every time we use the room. We are grateful that Yasanti helps us pay for it.

The stalls in Gamping Market are larger in size than other markets and there are toilets available at every stall. So we use the toilets of the stall owners without any charges.

For advocacy with the government, we do it together with other groups.

Tri Winarsih: Our fights are similar to what Mbak Ponirah and Mbak Musinem said. When I hear my mother's story, I can see that some small changes have happened.

Dewi Nova: What challenges do you face while organising and how do you deal with those?

Ponirah: Inactive members are one of our major challenges. Some do not come to the meeting nor pay dues for years. Sometimes I am a little hard with them. I say, “No dues, No free trainings and medical assistance.” Sometimes that works.

Members are also still reluctant to go outside the market. For example, they don't want to go to trainings outside the market nor do they want to do lobbying with the government. It is very difficult to build awareness that advocacy is the responsibility of all members. So only the leaders end up doing much advocacy.

Musinem: The toughest challenge is that the stall owners who we work for do not allow us to leave the job for group activities. We have to plead with them each time we have a meeting. Sometimes we get permission, sometimes not.



Tri Winarsih: The most difficult thing is members not being able to pay back their debts. It is hard to ask them because we know that they do not have the money. Sometimes, Ibu Umi from Yasanti helps.

Dewi Nova: What are the things that make you happy about being part of a group?

Ponirah: Two things, I have increased my knowledge and I have been able to borrow a capital for the *wedang uwuh* (spicy healthy drink) business.

Musinem: What makes me happy is that even if I am an old woman with very little education, I have met and talked to the members of our House of Representatives, the Labour Department and the BPJS (Social Security Organizing Agency) officers.

Tri Winarsih: Same here. I am thrilled that I have been able to meet and talk to so many important people in our province. It was also a great experience to meet other organised workers and lobby together. It increased my passion for social change.

The visit of the GAATW – Is Team (Bandana and Dewi Nova) to the women porters community in Kulonprogo, Yogyakarta



Courtesy: [Yasanti](#)

Interview and translation by Dewi Nova, GAATW-IS





Reflections on our Collective of Sex Workers

RANI, NAGAMANI, KEERTI, SHYAMALA, SIVALAKSHMI AND SHEBA

We face multiple forms of discrimination in society, and it is not easy to come together openly as a group. But collective formation is extremely important for us and we are glad that we receive on-going encouragement and guidance from WINS to strengthen our collective.

As a collective we feel stronger to face society. There are certain things that we can only share with our peers. Our collective also gives us an opportunity to build our skills and knowledge through training.

But we are also very conscious that we have a long way to go as a collective. We have to work harder to become more cohesive as a network. Our work is highly

stigmatized, and we face discrimination from mainstream society and even from some feminists and civil society organisations. Police violence is a major problem in our lives. Who can we go and complain to if the law enforcement officers are the perpetrators of violence? Many people think that we make easy money. We strongly feel that as women and as sex workers we have equal rights as all citizens of India. We must not be treated as offenders of moral standards or vectors of diseases. We are service providers, and we have a right to be heard by our state and society.

Government run HIV programmes do not take our needs into consideration. Only our supporters like WINS and NNSW understand us, mentor us with empathy and contribute to positive changes in our lives.



We work to create safe working conditions for sex workers. Our members receive trainings to understand the power structures around them and learn negotiation

skills. During the pandemic we learnt to use communication technologies and attend meetings online, take videos and upload text and photos in social media. We manage our own community-based organisation. During the dreaded COVID times, when everyone shunned us, we were able to reach out to people in our communities and support each other to the best of our ability.

At this stage, we also need to look critically into our own collective and analyse to what extent we have been able to build a democratic organisation. Do we have mutual respect within the organisation? Have we been able to address discrimination within our own group? Discussions on such difficult topics are important for our own growth.

We need to be able to share our experiences, create safe spaces and opportunities for our new and young members. There are some women within our group who do not want to publicly assert that they are sex workers. They think that it will expose them to more discrimination and abuse. But if that is the case, how can we move forward?



*Facilitation of discussion and translation of notes by R Meera from
Women's Initiatives (WINS), India*

From Community Legal Aid to CEDAW Shadow Reports, Self-Organizing Experience of Indonesian Sex Workers

AN INTERVIEW WITH RITO HERMAWAN OF ORGANISASI PERUBAHAN SOSIAL INDONESIA (OPSI)



OPSI (Organisasi Perubahan Sosial Indonesia/Organisation for Social Change Indonesia) is an organisation whose members are sex workers. OPSI is a forum for women, transwomen and male sex workers. The first OPSI congress was held on October 28, 2009 with the aim of fulfilling the constitutional rights of sex workers as citizens, eliminating the stigma against sex workers and encouraging the full and meaningful involvement of sex workers in HIV-AIDS prevention to the level of making policies keeping rights of sex workers at the centre. OPSI's vision

is to reach a situation where the Indonesian state carries out its obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of all citizens, including sex workers. OPSI's national secretariat is located in Jakarta and the organisation has branches across 22 provinces in Indonesia.

In the following interview, Dewi Nova from GAATW-IS talks to Rito Hermawan, the National Coordinator of OPSI.

Tell us about yourself and the situation of sex workers in Indonesia:

I have been working as a sex worker since 1995. I joined OPSI because I felt that sex workers should strengthen their bargaining power against sex business managers, consumers and their partners. At that time, I saw many sex workers, especially women sex workers, whose income was mostly taken by sex business managers and their partners.

This was because many women sex workers were handled by sex business operators. Most of them worked in music lounges and night clubs. In 2016 the local government issued many policies that resulted in the closure of *localization* (when the local government regulates sex work), it was the women sex workers who got adversely affected.

The condition was different for male sex workers and transwomen because many of them worked independently. Male sex workers are typically more secretive and many of them work as escorts or in massage parlours. Some work in city parks. Transwomen sex workers do the same.

As the practice of *localization* ended, raids on sex workers increased. So, since 2016 sex workers started to open online services or used their accommodations for sex work. But those services created vulnerabilities such as fraud from customers. For example, sometimes state officials came disguised as customers for the purpose of arresting sex workers. There were also several cases of murder of sex workers in their boarding rooms.



What attracts sex workers to join OPSI?

The main attraction is to be part of a community where they receive support and respect. Where someone is with you in times of need. Often it is not material

support. Psychological support and friendship are much appreciated by sex workers. Another reason is to increase knowledge on different issues. For example, to learn how to take care of our health as sex workers.

We have a Community Legal Service (CLS), which provides free legal assistance to sex workers; those who experience violence, and those who are in conflict with the law, i.e., those who get arrested after a raid. Currently, our CLS is spread across 21 provinces. OPSI provides paralegal training to fellow sex workers who are interested so that they can assist fellow workers. As for the court process, we cooperate with legal assistance in each city and province. We have developed working agreements for legal assistance in 11 provinces and memorandums of agreement with P2TP2A (a state agency that provides services for women and children in crisis centres) in several provinces.

OPSI also has a drop-in centre, a temporary residence for sex workers who are pregnant and others who may need a safe house. Our centre is also open to women victims of violence and returning migrant workers even though they are not sex workers. That is because we have good working relationships with several women's organisations.

How do you organise?

Friends who have joined OPSI visit fellow sex workers at hot spots. We talk to them, provide some information about OPSI and the benefits of sex workers joining this organisation. Of course, not every sex worker we go to shows an interest to join us.

What are the toughest challenges facing OPSI in terms of organising and how do you manage them?

Sometimes sex workers join but do not play an active role in the organisation. They do not show much interest in advocating for the rights of sex workers.

SARA issues (ethnicity, religion, race, and between groups) also affect us. The province of Aceh, for example, has adopted Sharia law in its local regulations. The law has a caning punishment for those (men and women) who commit adultery. Because of that, almost no women sex workers dare to join OPSI. As a result, OPSI members in Aceh are 99% transwomen. In Riau Province, the OPSI office was raided and our signboard was taken down by a group of people.

To manage these problems, we are trying to build good relations with the government in each region. Each OPSI branch office tries to register itself as a civil society organisation. In some provinces, we openly say that we are a sex workers group, in some, we call ourselves a group for marginalised communities. Those are our strategies.

What are the things that excite you about organising sex workers?

I am happy because now the voices of OPSI have been taken into account, especially in the HIV&AIDS and Gender Based Violence networks. For example, in 2022, OPSI joined the Forum Pemberi Layanan (the largest network of women victims of violence in Indonesia). They included OPSI documentation on violence against sex



workers in their reports and encouraged the state to ratify RUU Tindak Pidana Kejahatan Seksual (the Bill on the Crime of Sexual Violence). The bill has been passed recently.

We have also been involved in the preparation of the CEDAW shadow report twice. We even submitted a report independently as an OPSI report. In the first report, we joined the report of the IPPI (Indonesian Positive Women Association), a group of women living with HIV & AIDS.

Regarding social protection, we together with IPPI and the ICJR (The Institute for Criminal Justice Reform) conducted a judicial review of the BPJS (the Social Security Administering Body) policies. BPJS does not want to cover protection for sexually transmitted diseases and considers it a result of people's own mistakes. We

disagree with that. Our judicial review was rejected but we had tried our best and many people took notice of our advocacy. We know and people know that we are now ready to speak up for ourselves.

Courtesy: OPSI (Indonesia Social Change Organisation)

Interview and translation by Dewi Nova

Organising Migrant Domestic Workers in Chiang Mai, Thailand

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROOJESA SANWEE (PIM), MAP FOUNDATION

(Srishty Anand from GAATW International Secretariat had the privilege to celebrate May Day with the Northern Labour Network of Thailand. She spoke to Pim about her experience of organising migrant domestic workers in Chiang Mai. Kanchana Di-ut provided translation support.)

Tell me something about yourself.

I am Roojesa Sanwee also known as Pim by friends and colleagues. I am from the Shan community in Burma. I have been living and working in Thailand for nearly 20 years now. I have worked in many jobs here, as a waitress in restaurants, a domestic worker in several houses, and a caretaker of my employer's children. When I was young, I thought that domestic work was safer compared to other work such as construction or



agricultural work. I also thought that as domestic work covers food, rent and shelter, it would be easier to save money in this job.

My cousin, who migrated to Thailand before me, wore beautiful clothes when she visited home. Like the ones they show on TV. With that image in my head, I crossed the border and came to Thailand with my neighbour. I had just finished high school at that time. Only my mother knew about my plans.

Upon arrival in Thailand, I started working at a restaurant in return for meals and accommodation. But I was nervous to stay there because I did not have a work permit or any other documentation. I left the work. I used to go to a temple in Chiangmai to meet up with other people from my country. One day, I met a MAP Foundation staff there. One thing led to the other and I started as a Community Volunteer with MAP. Initially, I helped MAP with translation and interpretation for workers from the Shan community. That was how I met several domestic workers who were raped and abused by their employers. I realised that domestic workers are at the mercy of their employers. If they have a good employer, they are okay. If not, they can have many problems, and no one will know about it. I started to understand how the rights of domestic workers can be easily violated. I started providing information to migrant women who wanted to work in this sector. Chiang Mai had a large number of migrant domestic workers but no organised group. That is how I became a Domestic workers' organiser.

Can you tell me a little about the Domestic Workers Group?

Yes, the work with the domestic workers started in 2008 as part of MAP's Labour Rights for All programme. Domestic work was one of the labour sectors that we were focusing on. We had discussions with live-in domestic workers, domestic workers outsourced by private companies and domestic workers who live on their own and work in multiple households. We identified challenges that domestic workers face and strategized about addressing those. A collective was born.

In 2012, following the New Ministerial Regulation in Thailand that offered better protection for domestic worker's rights under the Labour Protection Act, we had some opportunity to advocate for rights protection. We ran postcard campaigns with the Labour Department for paid leave days. Right now, we work with 15 domestic worker leaders who are the focal points of that group. They conduct outreach and organise meetings with workers in the field. We have a message group in the Line app and a Facebook account. MAP's FM radio channel also helps domestic workers in maintaining communication among themselves. We do not have any membership fees, but we work to create a sense of belongingness.

Based on your experience can you tell me what motivates migrant domestic workers to organise? Why do they think that they should be organised? Are there any concrete gains/benefits/positive changes they have experienced because they are organised?

Most domestic workers know of MAP Foundation because of the legal assistance they get from us. This has been helpful in connecting with new members and creating trust. Over time, what motivates women workers are concrete things such as being able to go out of their employers' houses and having some paid leave days. Small but

concrete gains have helped in building confidence. This year we have organised events like this one. (Pim points to the stall that the Domestic Worker group has set up at Pantip Market for selling dishwashing and washing liquid soap on May Day.)

Domestic workers are motivated by listening to the experiences of the sisters who joined the group before them on MAP community radio which broadcasts stories of domestic workers. These stories and experiences illustrate how domestic workers don't need to be afraid. They also give tips on how to negotiate with employers and brokers.

What strategies do you use to organise the women? Where do you meet? How frequently? How do you convince them about the importance of organising?

The main challenge we face while trying to organise migrant women domestic workers is losing contact with them because they are a mobile group. The second one is to build trust to expand and add new members to the group. The third challenge is to bring attitudinal change amongst domestic workers so that they recognise their work as work and believe that they have legal rights as workers. We work on making domestic workers proud of their work and themselves.

If we talk about accessing justice within the legal system, the outcomes are visible and easy to see. But we can't do the same for organising. How do we know how strong we are? How can we consolidate our strength? To address the challenge of mobility, we identified focal persons in different areas who took up coordination tasks. The focal persons are domestic worker leaders who are within easy reach of

their peers. They are accessible for consultations. If there is something that is beyond the knowledge or skill of the focal persons, they bring it to me. The whole group also comes together once a month. We conduct trainings and organise events on topics the group identifies. We maintain regular communication via social media.

Our current members also talk to new workers because workers only listen to their friends. It is the current members who explain the work of MAP Foundation and the Domestic Workers Group to new members. But I want to say that organising domestic workers is not easy. We have to be patient and persistent.



Courtesy: [MAP Foundation](#)

The Working Women's Network/Shramajivi Mahila Sanjhal

TARA GHALAN AND SANTOSHI BUDHATHOKI, SARLAHI DISTRICT, NEPAL

Tara Ghalan



I am Tara Ghalan. I am married but live in my parental home. But I have good relationship with my husband and his family too. I am just staying here with my mother.

I came back to Nepal from Romania five years ago. My plan is to do business here. I am also interested in politics. So I may participate in elections for local government. That is why I do not want to go abroad again. In Sarlahi district, there are

many women who have worked abroad and returned to Nepal. During the time of COVID-19, we all tried to stay in contact with each other via phone and discussed the health situation and other local challenges.



Life Upon Return

For me, social integration was not a problem. I did not face any issues at family or community level. But I am worried about the future. When I was abroad, I was relaxed and stress free as I used to get a salary at the end of every month and was financially independent. But here in Nepal, it is difficult to find a job like the one I had in Romania. The skills which helped me earn abroad are useless here and I have no income now.

After returning from abroad, I did not do any paid work for a year. After that I opened a stationery shop. But then the pandemic started and my business went into loss. At present, it is slowly getting better. I am thinking of continuing this business and also open a coffee shop if I get a loan. I always had a dream to open a Book Cafe.

Tarangini Foundation has given us training and one of the results is the creation of our Working Women's Network. Over the years, I have understood that unity is power. Many of us thought that if all the women who have returned after working in foreign countries can join together, we can take our issues to the Government. We have not been able to conduct many community activities due to the pandemic. But slowly we are starting some activities. We have given a set of demands to the local government. As the Vice-President of this network. I believe that the Mayor and Deputy Mayor will take some action about our demands.

Santoshi Budhathoki

My name is a Santoshi Budhathoki. I have only studied up to class 4. I live in Hariwan-I I, Sarlahi. I have a son and a daughter. My daughter has already gotten married and my son is in Dubai. Since my son has already started earning money, I decided not to work abroad again.



It has been two years since I returned from Dubai. I live alone now. My husband who went missing when my children were very young is still missing. I went for foreign employment to take care of my children. When I learnt that Tarangini Foundation was organising a training for the women who had returned from foreign employment I decided to join it. Many of my friends and I thought that we would be getting jobs after the training. We thought that if we form a network, we will all get jobs. But then we realized that was not the case.

We are seen with Suspicion by Society

The training was about knowledge building and awareness raising. The training given by Dr. Renu Adhikari was really good. She explained about how patriarchy has ruled and dominated women, how it has a hold on women's work, body and identity.

When we discussed about our experiences after returning to Nepal, it became clear that we are seen with suspicion by society. Even by our families. Many people think women who went to abroad used their bodies for making money. I feel very sad about it. People have no idea how hard we work for our families! Some sisters said that even their children don't show any gratitude towards them.



I am hopeful about our Working Women's Network. I don't have any interest in politics. So, I had never been involved in any organisation but I will work actively in

this network in the upcoming days. I think Government should listen/ take action to address our problems. People's attitude towards us must change in the coming days. It will not be easy but we will work hard in the communities and try our best. We are convinced that Tarangini Foundation will help and guide us.



Courtesy: [Tarangini Foundation](#)

Interview and Translation by Renuka Surya of Tarangini Foundation

REMAN, A Paradise for Migrants in the World

VIANY DE MARCEAU

Look out your window and imagine how beautiful the world would be if we helped each other.

In order to make my world as beautiful as it is, I have a big dream: "to build a paradise for the migrants in the world" and its name is REMAN.

A few words about myself

My mother passed away when I was 9 years old, and I was in CM2 (second grade). I grew up with my grandmother and my only brother in a small town in Cameroon called Mandjo. Surrounded by my friends, my favorite Baobab tree, our little river Sango and many snails.

At my grandmother's house, there was no electricity, but I was very happy and my mother's presence was with me all the time. I could feel her presence in the solidarity of the mothers of the neighborhood who were always there when I needed help. They contributed to pay for my education. When I was sick, they brought me food and stayed at my bedside until very late at night. When my grandmother didn't cook, I never slept hungry because there was always a mother to invite us to eat.

When my father's wife openly told me, "Go to your aunt's house, I don't want disobedience and disorder in my house", there was always someone to take me in and comfort me, even though she hardly knew me. It is in such circumstances that I grew up, always helped by others.

Lebanon, a different world

But when I arrived in Lebanon, I worked for different families, each one different from the other. I faced many difficulties, from racism to mistreatment to violence. This was very different from the solidarity of my childhood. I kept going back and forth to the agent's office to change employers. All I needed was to be treated as a human being. One day at the agent's office, I met an Ethiopian woman with a busted finger that smelled and leaked puss. Nobody wanted to go near her or speak to her. When I said, "Show me your finger I just want to see it", she burst into tears. And after a few days of careful cleaning, her finger started to heal and she could find work.

On another visit to the agent's office, I met 5 girls. Four Ghanaians and one Ethiopian. They were working for a salary of \$200 per month. It was 2019, and the salaries had gone up, but they did not know it. In the bitterly cold months, they were made to sleep on the ground without any mattress, blanket, or heating. I explained to them that they should demand \$ 250 per month and it is the employer's responsibility to provide a warm bed for them. I told them that they would need to be very strong, determined and courageous. I told them that nothing comes easy in Lebanon, it's all about claiming your rights and fighting for it. They listened to me very carefully. I could see that they were trying to change. We talked more and when they went to talk to the agent, their voice was stronger and more confident.

A new life

Unable to deal with the many exploitative employers, I decided to try a life without any contract. I found a sister from my country who agreed to take the risk to help me and advised me on how to manage without a contract. She asked me, "What do you want to do outside?" I said that I would just work. And she said, "If you try to do anything else, you'll be carrying me on your back." Life outside the contract is different. I needed to integrate into my community, I had to be smart enough to find regular work and I also needed to be in contact with organisations that help with food in case of prolonged unemployment and problems with the police.

My Cameroonian big sister helped me find my own community in Lebanon. It was as if I was back in my own village again. She also told me that I could be of great help to my people because I was fluent in both English and French.

It was during this time that I came to know about the MCC (Community Center for Migrants). It was here that I learned about the law, especially the Kafala system which impacts our lives. I met many different people and the conversations were enriching. I participated in all the meetings that the Cameroonian community organised and as usual I had many questions that sometimes did not have answers.

One Sunday in October we, the members of ***Together Forever*** had a meeting with International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). The meeting went well until a question asked by the meeting facilitator stopped everything "How did you start ***Together Forever***? What is your growth path?" Even the secretary could not answer this question and the meeting ended.

The next day in our group, I asked the same question. I thought we could try to find the answer together. I thought we should think about our growth path. But no, I didn't get an answer but rather a shower of criticism. The atmosphere became tense, and I didn't realize it then but I was already on the black list. Just a week later, early one morning I saw a lot of messages arriving in the WhatsApp group complaining about the previous meeting and asking why others were not invited. I tried to explain. But my explanation was not taken well. That very day I found that my name was removed from the ***Together Forever*** group. I no longer had my community.

Initially, I was confident and relaxed because I didn't think that I had done anything wrong. But the weeks that followed were very difficult because I started to stress and blame myself for everything. I regretted my questions, questioned my interventions, and rejected my reactions. I was alone again. I had become very attached to my community and the rejection hurt. It felt as if my country had disowned me, and I was alone. Nobody called me to reassure me that I belonged to the group.

It was then that I had a conversation with a friend, about this experience in our community. During our discussion, I brought up the idea of creating a new organisation. She immediately validated the idea and said that she would support me to create this organisation if I wanted.

Things started getting clearer in my head, my ideas found directions, my life found a reason, my questions immediately made sense, and my meetings with people gave me inspiration.

Every day I thought deeply about what I wanted to do in this organisation. I trained myself to discipline my thoughts and have clear ideas. I reviewed my past experience to learn all the lessons that life had taught me. My life was now meaningful again. I wanted to create an organisation to help girls be strong, educated, intelligent, and free. I began by meeting with a friend, Geraldine, a prominent member of the Cameroonian community, to discuss the project. One Friday night in November we decided on the name RMAN which was changed a few days later when the third member of the group joined. RMAN became REMAN which is an acronym for Regroupement des Migrants de l'Afrique Noire.

The more I discussed with others about this project, the more my ideas grew, and the more I began to write and expand its purpose and goals. The way people reacted filled me with energy, and my intelligence expanded. I had finally found my reason for living. The three of us would meet for hours to decide on the organisation's principles, its struggles, its ultimate goal, and its motto, ***Determination and Freedom for Life***. Our common lived experience of racism and discrimination gave us the determination to move on. It was urgent and important for us to create a family where we could help each other, support each other, wipe our tears, share our sorrows, and join forces. REMAN gave a new meaning to our lives.

There was no dearth of detractors. For many, I had become the most hated person in my community. They said that REMAN was created to compete with the existing group. They accused that it was based on one ethnicity. Many lowered their gaze when we met and stopped inviting me to any celebration.

In the midst of all these problems, I had to shine. I had to be transparent, accountable and democratic. I and my friends took leadership training. The future of REMAN is unclear, the project is still in its infancy, and the members are still just a few but the core is already there.

But I am certain that this project will come to life and this dream will become a reality. If I have learned one thing in life, it is that "you become what you focus your thoughts on."

I am Viany de Marceau and my dream is to build a paradise for the migrants in the world.



Courtesy: Anti-Racism Movement, Lebanon

Education & Unionising are Keys to Effect Change

WINANINGSIH KUSWADI AND YUNI SRI RAHAYU

SAPULIDI DOMESTIC WORKERS UNION, JAKARTA, INDONESIA

Both of us are domestic workers from Sapulidi Domestic Workers Union from Jakarta, Indonesia. We want to share our experiences of organising.

Winaningsih Kuswadi



My name is Winaningsih Kuswadi. People call me Wina. I am a mother of 2 daughters who are 13 and 7 years old. I have been working as a domestic worker since 1998. I worked as a migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong and then returned to Indonesia and continued to work in Jakarta.

I joined Sapulidi Domestic Workers Union in Greater Jakarta when the union was founded by JALA-PRT. My friend told me about a domestic worker who was not being paid by her employer. She came to know about JALA-PRT and reported the case to

them. JALA-PRT took up her case and she could get her wage. Then she told some friends about this. Everyone got interested to join the union.

In April 2013, we were invited to a meeting to discuss domestic workers issues and how we can organise ourselves. Mbak Lita from JALA-PRT told us about the working conditions of domestic workers in our country. She emphasized that as human beings, as women, and as workers all of us have the right to decent working conditions. We felt that we needed each other and our own group to share our experiences with each other, to find solutions to our problems, and to support each other.

Mbak Lita talked about the experiences of domestic workers in Yogyakarta and Semarang. She said that they have formed Domestic Workers Unions in their cities. We came to know that Tunas Mulia Domestic Workers Union in Yogyakarta Province and Merdeka Domestic Workers Union in Semarang have been formed since 2003. Their leaders and members are actively organising and they have weekly schools for their education.

In that meeting, we shared our problems, and we decided to form a union like our sisters in Yogyakarta and Semarang. We decided to invite many domestic worker friends to join our new union.

Then on 16 June 2013, 32 domestic workers in Jakarta Selatan, established the domestic workers union in Jakarta. We named our union *Sapulidi* which means broomstick in Bahasa Indonesia. It is a symbol of our job. Our work unites us and unity is strength.

So I have been part of our union for 10 years now!

Yuni Sri Rahayu



Hello, my name Yuni Sri Rahayu. People call me Yuni. I am a mother of 4 children. Three of my children are still in school. I have worked as a domestic worker in Jakarta Selatan (South Jakarta, Greater Jakarta) since 2009.

I joined Sapulidi Domestic Workers Union in 2013. I have learnt many things from the union.

Wina

I have already talked about how we formed the union to address our common problems at work. Of discrimination, harassment, violence and exploitation. Our sisters in Yogyakarta and Semarang were our inspiration.

We took the following steps to build the Sapulidi Domestic Workers Union:

- We developed a constitution of our union which explained our decision making structure and the mechanism to run our organisation.
- We created an executive committee that will be responsible for organising, capacity building and advocacy.

- We also elected leaders for various communities who will be responsible for ground work.
- We decided that there should be a monthly membership fee.
- We set monthly and annual targets for recruiting new members.
- We discussed, developed and agreed upon our annual and monthly plans.

Yuni

So, what are the goals of our union?

First, there should be Decent work for all Domestic Workers in Indonesia. The Indonesian government should ratify ILO Conventions 189 and 190 and implement them.

Secondly, the union should represent domestic workers in advocacy initiatives.

And finally, we want a strong and democratic union.

Wina

So, what do we do in our union?

We know that there is strength in numbers. Therefore, increasing our membership is one of our key tasks.

But only number is not enough. We need to have knowledge and information. Building the knowledge base of all our members and making sure that they have accurate information are very important. We conduct capacity building trainings on advocacy skills and on legislation. Our union conducts domestic workers school every week which all our members attend. Topics include conditions of decent work, social protection, sexual and reproductive health rights, complaint mechanisms, and elimination of discrimination, harassment, and violence in the world of work. We also organise skills trainings on public speaking, writing, developing campaign materials, and how to use social media for advocacy.





During the pandemic we conducted the school on-line via Zoom, YouTube and WhatsApp groups.

We often do mass action, dialogues with policy makers to demand National Domestic Workers Law and stronger social security.

Let's talk about our successes.

Because of our continuous advocacy more than 2500 domestic workers have joined the Employment Social Security for the domestic workers that cover JKK (Accident Security), JK Death Security and JHT (Old Age Security). Most of them have been able to get their employers to pay fully for the social security.





We are very well organised. Both Yuni and I are part of the Advocacy Team. We also have campaign teams. We have local and national level campaign teams. We also have a para legal team. We provide hotline services for our members. The para legal team makes a list of bad employers and agents and shares this list with all our members so they are boycotted.

Wina and Yuni

Before joining the union, we did not know about our rights, and we did not know how to demand our rights. We just accepted our situation. We did not have information, nor the courage to speak up. We were afraid so we just put up with bad treatment and violence.

After joining the union and being part of the domestic workers school, we know better. We have learned to negotiate, and we can see that there are changes not just

at workplace but also within our families. Some of us are happy that our husbands also share housework with us now. It is not easy, but we keep trying.

Courtesy: [JALA-PRT](#)

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