

THE HIDDEN WAR ZONE OF UNDOCUMENTED AND TRAFFICKED ASIAN WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS

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1. The Asian Context:

Some preliminary remarks on the broad lines

The present race for production, consumption and profits is leading to exploding numbers of people migrating and relocating from rural Asia to urban centers in Asia. Basically there are 3 centers of economic gravity in Asia: China, India and the Gulf/Oil-countries including Saudi Arabia.

The major migrations in Asia are still happening within the large and populated countries of China and India.

In China 100 million people over the last 15 years have been on the move from the largely rural 'hinterland' to the eastern and coastal urban industrial cities.

In India also another 100 million people over the last 15 years are on the move from India's rural hinterlands like U.P., Bihar, Kashmir, West Bengal, (A.P.) Andhra Pradesh its industrial mega-cities: Mumbai, Calcutta, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Chennai.

In the Gulf countries millions of workers (from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan) are attracted in the building boom in the regions major cities.

The above mentioned movements are for China and India still largely confined to the national boundaries and in the case of the Gulf countries it involves international migration.

The second level of destination countries in Asia are the older and more recently industrialized countries/ economies like Japan, Hongkong, Singapore, S. Korea, and Malaysia.

The labor migration towards these countries is originating mostly in the group of lesser developed or poorer economies in South and East Asia, like Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Bangladesh and to a lesser extent Myanmar and Cambodia.

The labor migration to these countries is not only male labor like the massive migration in China, in India and towards the Gulf building boom, but increasingly consisting of women migrant labor as domestic laborers, as undocumented labor in industries and plantations in Malaysia and in the entertainment and prostitution industry throughout East and Southeast Asia.

Thirdly there are specific forms of migration (often also in the form of trafficking) for instance from neighboring countries of China to cater to the spiraling demand for brides in China because of the 'missing girls and woman' due to the long time one child policy in China.

Fourthly there are the migrations because of the military invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq, presently leading to 50.000 people monthly leaving Iraq over the last year or more.

In my presentation I want to focus on the situation of undocumented women migrant workers from Indonesia working in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, and Malaysia.

2. Asian Women Migrants: the General Situation: between Recognition and Gender based Exploitation

- The flow of Asian women workers abroad has been steadily increasing during the last three decades, and is still increasing;
- The exponential growth of Asia's "Miracle" economies is highly dependent on the existence of underpaid migrant workers who are working in the areas of Three D's job --Dirty, Difficult, and Dangerous. (Jones, 2000). The governments of the poorer and more indebted countries of Asia (i.e., Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Vietnam) view placement of migrant workers as a much needed source of foreign exchange; they call migrant workers hero's or heroines.
- Unfortunately, in the midst of this official recognition, women migrant workers continue to be treated as export commodity only, facing gender based exploitation and violence, are being trafficked, and marginalised from the human rights protection system

3. Root causes of Being Treated as Export Commodity (Undocumented and Trafficked Women Migrant Workers)

- The Failure of the prevailing Economic Development paradigm in the Countries of Origin (structural poverty in rural Asia, neglect of rural

economy and infrastructure, aborted agrarian reform, lack of employment, malfunction of labour department and immigration office, lack of information, corruption, weak of legal enforcement)

- Aggressive demand of Cheap Labour, National Sovereignty of Country Destination
- Recruitment companies and their government support;
- Recruitment Strategy and Revolving Door System
- Patriarchal values and practices both in country of origin and country of destination

4. The Hidden War Zone

- The hidden war zone faced by women migrant workers is embodied in their existence as being: women, foreigner and workers
- The hidden war zone consists of three elements: a) pregnancy (and sexuality), b) children, and c) family life
- These war zones are being ignored and perpetuated due to the interest of the labour market, government policies, and existing patriarchal values as well as the legal system;
- In these war zones women migrant workers face continuous angst for loosing their job, being socially stigmatised, being single mother, being inhumanly treated, and are confronted with various forms of gender based violence.

5. Survival Strategy of Women Migrant Workers

- Using their own way, undocumented and trafficked women migrant workers fight in this war zone to be recognized as human beings;
- There are many obstacles on this long road of struggle: no (or lack of) support from their families, from society, from government, and from the international community;
- The existing legal system is inadequate yet to support their rights. The delicate barrier of their struggle also comes from the practices of corruption and impunity amongst the government and legal enforcement office bearers.

6. The Role of International Community and Human Rights Mechanism to end these hidden war zone.
