

A-Day-Off Campaign Takes Off!

With a multimedia presentation on the resistant pictures of Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs), mobilising in Hong Kong and a presentation from Dolores Balladares, a FDW from Hong Kong, the Regional Campaign “Recognise Domestic Work as Work” has begun. As a kick start campaign, the United for Foreign Domestic Workers Rights (UFDWRs) launched its “One paid day (24hrs) off a week” campaign for foreign domestic workers, on the 4th November 07, at the ASEAN Civil Society Conference in Singapore.

CARAM Asia’s Foreign Domestic Workers Taskforce together with Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is the co-secretariat of the UFDWRs. The UFDWRs is a coalition made up of 6 regional or international networks committed to the promotion and protection of the rights of FDWs.

During the campaign launch, three thematic inputs for discussion from APWLD, CARAM Asia and Mekong Migration Network (MMN) stimulated fruitful discussions. APWLD spoke about the issue of FDWs in the context of women’s human rights. CARAM Asia highlighted the lack of health rights and wellbeing of FDWs in all stages of migration. MMN underscored peculiar migration situations in the Mekong region by inputting on the impacts of social and political conditions on FDWs in the Mekong region.

Sixteen foreign domestic workers from Indonesia and Philippines who are working in Singapore joined more than 45 participants to attend the workshop. The workshop generated hearty sharing and discussions about the current situations of FDWs in many receiving countries. The sharing highlighted the need for implementation and enforcement of legislations protecting the rights and benefits of FDWs, even when laws come into existence. The sharing from FDW representatives from Hong Kong portrayed a real situation in Hong Kong. It was made aware that not all the FDWs in Hong Kong get a day off despite the law granting this benefit. Hence, the need for law enforcement and implementation of the law is just as important.

Furthermore, the unscrupulous role of recruitment agencies and the need to regulate and monitor their recruitment processes was also drawn to attention. Many participants also expressed that the existing MoUs between sending and receiving countries are merely business transaction agreements. They provide weak protective mechanisms. Some activists stressed that seemingly positive government exerted efforts toward legalising the migration process can lead to further violation of human rights. In light of slow bureaucratic immigration processes not corresponding to the growing needs for women to migrate out of their countries to take up domestic work, further leads to irregular migration. Gender selective immigration policies and the states putting age limits on women who seek to migrate are violation of women’s human rights. FDWs pointed out that although it may seem a trivia issue, yet it is extremely important to address

the need for a clear stipulation of what one paid day off truly means. The vague interpretation of one day off affects FDWs when employers put on curfew on the day off that FDW have.

As for policy advocacy, the UFDWRs will be working closely with the drafting committee members of a multilateral framework for the protection of migrant workers within the ASEAN initiatives. As it stated in its statement to the ASEAN body, the UFDWRs identified the ASEAN mechanism as one of the strategic venues to be engaged with in their attempt to protect the rights of FDWs from the region.

As the situation gets more intense, forces joining the coalition to respond to the situation become stronger. The regional campaign is now opened to other groups to join. The UFDWRs has been extended and strengthened by new groups coming in from one of the most crucial FDWs receiving countries, Singapore. Six FDWs groups based in Singapore have joined the campaign immediately after the launch. With the FDWs groups joining the campaign, the voices and concerns from the ground will be reflected in the regional campaign. The FDWs will be pushing their most urgent concerns and immediate issues. On the upcoming International Migrants' Day, the groups will be calling for the recognition of domestic work as work and one paid day off a week. This call will be echoed by many other groups beyond the ASEAN region, both at regional and national level, who recognise the need to promote and protect the rights of FDWs, who recognise domestic work as work, and domestic workers as workers.