

Migrant Voices from CARAM Asia

GOOD MORNING TO ALL OF YOU. I AM RINA, 34 YRS OLD, MARRIED AND I HAVE TWO CHILDREN.

I WAS FORMER DOMESTIC WORKER. YEARS AGO, I DREAMED OF WORKING ABROAD TO HELP MY FAMILY RISE FROM POVERTY.

MY CASE IS NOT RELATED DIRECTLY TO THE CURRENT FINANCIAL CRISIS, BUT IS VERY MUCH ONE OF ECONOMIC STRUGGLE, MIGRATION AND HIV.

IN THE YEAR 1992, I WAS ABLE TO LEAVE OUR SMALL TOWN AND EVENTUALLY WORKED AS A DOMESTIC WORKER. I WAS ONLY 17 YRS OLD. THE PASSTPORT I USED TO GO TO QATAR HAD ANOTHER SURNAME. MY AGE IN THE PASSPORT WAS OLDER. THE AGENCY SENT ME TO QATAR WITHOUT ASKING FOR A PLACEMENT FEE. THEY SAID THAT THIS WILL BE PAID THROUGH SALARIES DEDUCTION ONCE I STARTED WORKING.

MY EMPLOYERS WERE VERY STRICT. THEY WERE VERY SELFISH AND INSENSITIVE. THEY GAVE US VERY LITTLE TO EAT AND SOMETIMES WE WOULD GO WITOUT EATING AFTER A WHOLE DAY'S WORK. I WAS ALSO MADE TO WORK FOR MY EMPLOYERS EXTENDED FAMILY. THE WORST PART WAS THEY PAID ME LESS THAN WHAT WAS STIPULATED IN MY CONTRACT.

MANY OTHER WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS HAVE SIMILAR EXPERIENCES. THERE ARE EVEN THOSE WHO DO NOT RECEIVE THEIR SALARIES AT ALL. BECAUSE THEY NEED TO SEND MONEY HOME TO THEIR FAMILIES, THEY HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO EITHER ENGAGE IN PART-TIME WORK, SOMETIMES, EVEN SEX WORK. OTHERS WOULD ENGAGE IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER MIGRANTS OR WITH NATIONALS OF THAT COUNTRY TO EASE THEIR LONELINESS OR TO FULFILL THEIR NEED FOR COMFORT AND AFFECTION.

ALSO, THEIR BOYFRIENDS COULD SUPPORT THEM FINANCIALLY. UNFORTUNATELY, THESE SITUATIONS MAKE MIGRANT WORKERS VULNERABLE TO HIV.

IN THE CURRENT TIMES, WITH SO MANY LAYOFFS WORKING CONDITIONS ARE WORSENING. MANY FRIENDS ARE DOING ANYTHING TO STICK TO THEIR JOBS AND GO BEYOND YOUR DUTIES JUST TO MAKE SURE THAT THEY ARE ABLE TO SEND SOME MONEY HOME...

BACK TO MY STORY IN QATAR, THERE WERE TIMES WHEN I GOT SICK BUT STILL I HAD TO WORK. I WAS NOT GIVEN ANY MEDICINE. I COULD NOT GO TO THE DOCTOR SINCE I WAS ALLOWED ONLY ONE DAY OFF FOR AN ENTIRE YEAR.

THERE WERE SEVERAL OCCASIONS WHEN MY MALE EMPLOYER MADE SEXUAL ADVANCES TO ME. I WAS ORDERED TO GIVE HIM A MASSAGE AND ALL THE WHILE HE KEPT TOUCHING MY PRIVATE PARTS. I COULD DO NOTHING TO STOP HIM. ALL I COULD DO WAS ENDURE THE HARDSHIPS FOR THE SAKE OF MY FAMILY.

IT WAS IN 1999 WHEN I WORKED IN DUBAI, JUST AFTER THE ASIAN CRISIS. I WAS HIRED BY A REAL MONSTER. MY MALE EMPLOYER RAPED ME REPEATEDLY. WHEN I HAD MUSTERED ENOUGH COURAGE, I TOLD MY LADY EMPLOYER ABOUT WHAT HER HUSBAND HAD BEEN DOING TO ME. TO MY SURPRISE, SHE BELIEVED ME AND EVEN HELPED ME REPORT HER HUSBAND TO THE AUTHORITIES. EVEN THE POLICE WAS SURPRISED BECAUSE IT WAS THEIR FIRST EXPERIENCE TO HAVE THE WIFE OF AN ARAB EMPLOYER ON THE SIDE OF A FOREIGN DOMESTIC WORKER. AFTERWARDS, SHE HELPED ME RETURN TO MY COUNTRY. I WAS FINALLY ABLE TO COME HOME TO MY COUNTRY AFTER SEVEN MONTHS' STAY IN DUBAI.

UNFORTUNATELY, NOTHING CAME OUT OF THE CASE I FILED AGAINST MY EMPLOYER. THE AGENCY PROMISED ME THAT THEY WILL PURSUE THE CASE IN MY BEHALF BUT AFTER I GOT BACK TO THE PHILIPPINES, I FOUND OUT THAT THEY DID NOT DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT.

EVEN AFTER EVERYTHING THAT I HAD ENDURED FROM MY PREVIOUS EMPLOYERS; I STILL DID NOT LOSE HOPE AND STILL BELIEVED THAT WORKING ABROAD WAS THE ONLY WAY TO MAKE OUR LIVES BETTER. IN JUNE OF THE SAME YEAR, I APPLIED FOR OVERSEAS WORK AGAIN. I WAS ABOUT TO LEAVE FOR MALAYSIA AS A DOMESTIC WORKER WHEN MY MEDICAL TEST RESULTS SHOWED THAT I WAS POSITIVE FOR HIV.

WHEN I WAS DIAGNOSED WITH HIV IT FELT LIKE THE MOON EXPLODED IN MY FACE...OR A BOMB EXPLODED... I KEPT ASKING MYSELF, WHAT WILL I DO? I WAS SO SHOCKED. I COULDN'T ACCEPT IT. I DIDN'T WANT TO GO HOME. I WANTED TO BE ALONE. I CRIED EVERYDAY. IT WAS SO HARD TO ACCEPT BECAUSE AT THAT TIME I DIDN'T HAVE ANY IDEA ABOUT HIV/AIDS. I THOUGHT IT MEANT THAT I WAS DYING.

ONE OF THE WORST IMPACTS OF HIV INFECTION IS THAT I CAN NO LONGER WORK ABROAD. MANY MIGRANT WORKERS WHO ARE DIAGNOSED WITH HIV ARE LEFT WITHOUT ANY SOURCE OF STEADY INCOME. IN THE PHILIPPINES, JOBS ARE VERY HARD TO FIND.

ONE DAY I MET A VOLUNTEER OF POSITIVE ACTION FOUNDATION PHILIPPINES IN THE HOSPITAL (PAFPI). THEY PROVIDED ME WITH THE PROPER INFORMATION ABOUT HIV/AIDS THEY TOLD ME ABOUT THEIR ORGANIZATION AND INTRODUCED ME TO THEIR SUPPORT GROUP. EVER SINCE, I STARTED WORKING FOR PAFPI AS A PROJECT ASSISTANT FOR THEIR FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAM. IT TOOK ME SIX MONTHS TO ACCEPT MY HIV STATUS. WHEN I GOT INVOLVED WITH ACHIEVE'S RESEARCH IN 2001, THEY GAVE ME AN

OPPORTUNITY TO BECOME AN ADVOCATE AND THEY FACILITATED MY PARTICIPATION IN DIFFERENT FORUMS AS A RESOURCE SPEAKER. MY INVOLVEMENT WITH THEM ENCHANCED MY KNOWLEDGE AND MY SKILLS. I AM NOW ABLE TO ALSO IMPART TO OTHERS WHAT I HAVE LEARNED.

I AM ALSO A MEMBER OF BABAE PLUS, A SUPPORT GROUP OF WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV. IN THIS GROUP, WE LEARN OUR RIGHTS AS WOMEN AND THIS HELPS ME IN MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MY CHILDREN AND MY HUSBAND. I ALSO DERIVE STRENGTH FROM THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE SUPPORT GROUP.AND PRESENTLY I BASE MY PROJECT IN CEBU CITY PHILIPPINES WHEREIN I HELP TO ORGANIZE NEW PLHIV GROUP NAMED CEBU PLUS WHICH IS NOW SUPPORTED BY POSITIVE ACTION FONDATION PHILS. INC.AND REMEDIOS AIDS FONDATION. CEBU PLUS WAS STARTED TO MAKE INNOVATIVE ACTIVITIES AND WAS ABLE TO FACILATE FREE CD4 COUNT SERVICE TO ALL PLHIV MEMBERS. PART OF HIV-PREVENTIVE ACTIVITIES, I ALSO VOLUNTEER MYSELF AS ONE OF THE FACILITATORS ON PRE-DEPARTURE ORIENTATION SEMINAR TO ALL MIGRANT WORKERS IN CEBU CITY PHILIPPINES.

I AM CURRENTLY TAKING ANTIRETROVIRAL DRUGS, WHICH ALLOWS ME TO BE HEALTHY. I AM NOW LIVING WITH MY FAMILY IN CEBU CITY, WHERE I WAS BORN AND WHERE WE HOPE TO START A NEW LIFE.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR LISTENING TO MY STORY. AS I SAID, THE CURRENT FINANCIAL CRISIS HAS HAD NO DIRECT IMPACT IN MY LIFE, BUT IT WILL HAVE IN MANY MANY MIGRANTS AROUND THE REGION. AS THEY LOSE THEIR JOBS AND BECOME EITHER UNDOCUMENTED OR ENGAGE IN UNSAFE MIGRATION. MOREOVER, HEALTH SERVICES FOR MIGRANTS ARE UNAVAILABLE IN THE REGION – WITH VERY FEW EXCEPTIONS – SO IT IS VERY IMPORTANT THAT SOMETHING SO THAT MIGRANTS ARE ABLE TO REACH HEALTH CARE WHEREVER THEY WORK AND LIVE.

I AM THANKFUL TO THE ORGANIZERS – TO UNDP, ILO, UNAIDS, JUNIMA, ACHIEVE AND CARAM - FOR MAKING THE SPACE TO BRING UP THIS VERY IMPORTANT ISSUES. UNSAFE MIGRATION AND HIV CAN HAVE DRAMATIC EFFECTS IN PEOPLE'S LIVES, AND THE LIVES OF THEIR FAMILIES.

I HOPE YOU WILL CONTINUE TO ADVOCATE FOR THE PROTECTION OF MIGRANT WORKERS, OUR RIGHT TO HEALTH, AND THAT EVENTUALLY CHANGES WILL BE MADE IN THE REGION SO THAT WE ARE NO DISCRIMINATED AND MARGINALIZED.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH