

Focus On The World

The Tragedy of the Indonesian Female Migrant Worker

By WAHYUNI KAMAH

When Fatimah (pseudonym) came to Arab Saudi to work, she never expected that her future would end in a hospital. The Indonesian employment agency that sent her to Arab Saudi falsified her age on her passport -- she is 18 but her passport states she was born in 1975 -- one of many common violations the employing agency commits. But there was more danger in her future than she could ever have known.

Fatimah worked in Arab Saudi where her female "master" frequently tortured her. The teenaged son of her master tried to rape her, and when she begged for help, the family ignored her. Finally, she escaped, and a Philippine driver took her to an agency worker office in Damman. There, five Arabian men bought her a return ticket to Jakarta under the condition that she "serve" them first. When she refused, she was forced to drink a glass of water that had been poisoned. When she fainted, the five men took turns raping her. She eventually arrived, weak and ill, in Jakarta, and was treated at Dr. Soekanto Polri Hospital (Kompas, Oct. 16, 2003).

Sariah, 17, was treated in the Psychiatry Unit of Dr. Soekanto Polri Hospital, Jakarta. Completely depressed, thin and pale, Sariah, from Cirebon, West Java, worked in Madina, Arab Saudi. One day, while she was taking out the garbage in the house yard, she was kidnapped. She was returned home in the evening, her dress torn and her body skinned and bruised. Sariah stopped speaking, working, and eating. Two weeks after this incident, she returned to Indonesia. Her legs are still bruised and swollen. She was allegedly raped (Kompas, October 21, 2003).

Fatimah and Sariah are not the only Indonesian female migrant workers that return home to Indonesia after being tortured or raped in their work places. Others return home with physical injuries such as broken legs, devastatingly bruised bodies, or severe depression. Each day at least 20 workers are sent to the hospital. Some have contracted illnesses, while others are severely depressed. Within a two-week period in October, 12 Indonesian workers were treated in the Psychiatry Unit, Polri Hospital. The Indonesian newspaper Kompas recently reported an

alarming number of female Indonesian workers in Kuwait that return home after having been tortured and raped there. Some female workers return home pregnant due to rape, or bring home infants born as a result of pregnancy from rape. Many of these rape victims try to dispose of their infants; others attempt suicide during their pregnancy. Some of them try to give their babies to an officer at the

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airport upon returning to Indonesia.

Indonesia began sending workers abroad in an effort to compensate for the lack of a foreign exchange source due to the drop in oil prices. Indonesia is among several Southeast Asian countries that provides migrant workers to other countries. In general, Indonesian migrant workers are employed as housemaids; the rest work in agriculture, manufacturing, construction, health and marine work. In 2000, there were 435,219 Indonesians working abroad; 67 percent were women. The three main destination countries are Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and South Korea. Indonesia earned USD 2.3 billion in foreign exchange revenue from migrant worker employment.

To work in the Middle East countries, Indonesian workers typically sign a two-year contract. They earn about \$143 (USD) per month; in actuality, they are paid only for 19 months, because they must give their first five months' salary to the agency in Indonesia that sends them abroad to work. If they return home before the contract ends, the employing agency in Indonesia chases them like criminals to recover the money.

The employing agency receives USD 2,000 from the agency in the destination country three months after the workers are placed. The agency in the destination country gets the money from the worker's "master." That money is earmarked for emergencies, such as worker illness, or if the worker

needs to return home within the contract period. However, the agency in Indonesia has never used this money for these purposes; even when workers fulfill their contracts and return home, the agencies in Indonesia keep the money.

Such fraud is only one of the problems that Indonesian workers face. Others include illegal recruitment, falsifying documents (such as passports), and sexual harassment during out-processing. When they arrive in the destination country, workers are sometimes traded between agencies, receive no salary, are sexually harassed, and in extreme cases, beaten, raped, kidnapped, or deported. When they decide to return to Indonesia, they endure further humiliation: arriving in Terminal 3 at Jakarta's airport, they must pay bribes, (getting unfair value of foreign exchange), and are usually robbed on their way home. Of the 30,000-40,000 Indonesian workers that come home each month, 10-20% can bring no money at all, which causes even more horrendous problems.

In response to the increasing numbers of Indonesian workers coming home in mentally and physically ill conditions, the Indonesian House of Representatives is working on a

Bill to Protect the Indonesian Migrant Workers. Meanwhile, the Indonesian Minister of Transmigration and Manpower, Jacob Nuwa Wea, said this past November that the requirements and qualifications of migrant workers would be strictly set. Many migrant workers are unqualified for the jobs to which they are recruited and assigned, and they don't understand the local language, either.

Wahyuni Kamah is a freelance journalist based in Jakarta, Indonesia. She graduated from the University of Indonesia. Wahyuni contributes stories to local and international media, and also translates books and works as freelance translator for local and international non-governmental organizations in Jakarta.



During the dictatorship of Indonesia's second president, Suharto (1967-1999), the families, children and even grandchildren of political prisoners were the pariahs of society. Unable to vote, join public service, take part in politics or work in government agencies, their lives were deprived systematically. Ade Rostina Sitompul worked quietly and tirelessly for them.

The brave and bright 65-year-old woman learned about the plight of political prisoners after the 30 September Movement (G30S) in 1965. Approximately half a million people died, and many people were imprisoned without trial in the coup d'état, which brought Suharto to the throne.

Ade Rostina Sitompul took food to the jails -- the nutritional value of prison food was so low that prisoners would almost certainly die in the harsh conditions -- and helped the families of the prisoners as well.

Ade worked with Humaika, an organization established in 1978 to care for political prisoners and their families, which was disbanded in 1979. She also worked with a similar organization, New Life Foundation, was set up in 1986. Ade went to the jails often but in 1989 the government banned her visit to Cipinang jail.

In 1995, a panel of prominent legal and human rights campaigners in Jakarta awarded Ade the Yap Thiam Hien Award for her work.

Since 1990's, Ade has been working as a human rights activist for the victims in East Timor. People seek her out for help and advice at her Jakarta home. Ade continues to struggle for human rights. Now she is active in Indonesia Human Rights Voice.