

## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

The idea of having the tripartite conference was in recognition of a growing need to address the increasing and continuing violations of basic human rights of women migrant workers and the lack of support available to them in the Asia Pacific region. The APWLD Labour & Migration Task Force (L&M TF), at its annual task force meeting in May 1999, decided to organise a tripartite conference of trade unions, migrant workers associations and women's organisations on the rights of migrant women workers. The conference was organised in partnership with Migrante International that saw the participation of 29 individuals representing national organisation from the three different sectors in the Asia Pacific region.

The vision of the Task force was to bring together representatives of the three different sectors to address the concern particularly in view of the trends and impacts of globalisation on developing countries with a women's agenda. The conference set out on the very basic premise that in migration, women have been the most vulnerable to oppression. For this reason, the conference is a means of finding out how the different sectors can work together to develop strategies to address the situation of women migrant workers.

The Conference's primary objective was to address the growing negative impact of globalisation on migrant women workers by providing a platform of dialogue among workers organisation, women's organisation and trade union groups on the rights of migrant women workers. It was also an attempt to create an avenue to discuss and address specifically the gender aspects of problems confronted by migrant women workers.

Utilising the conference to its maximum, the group also aimed to explore the possibility of establishing a regional network of local trade unions, migrant workers associations and women's organisation. It was also envisaged that the conference would build and strengthen the alliances between these groups, increase and guarantee better understanding of migrant women workers issues amongst trade union organisations, particularly in shifting discussions from gender neutral to gender sensitive perspectives.

### **Context**

Globalisation has significant adverse effects particularly on labour migration. Privatisation and liberalisation of national economies to ensure the free flow of capital, goods and services are the major instruments of globalisation. In this globalised free-market, states are weakened by transnational corporations and international institutions that wield power in global transactions. For many governments in the Asia Pacific region, the pursuit to protect the interests of their citizens is eclipsed by the primary pursuit for

capital accumulation. Labour, for instance, has been traded as a “commodity” – kept at the lowest cost and with least protection at all times to maximise profits for international capitalist production.

As a result, most developing economies have adopted, either implicitly or explicitly, labour migration as a national strategy to address unemployment, at the same time earn foreign exchange capital from the remittances of migrant workers. Since the primary objectives of many governments, is to accumulate capital, both developing and developed, receiving and sending, neither is willing to adequately address the interest of migrant workers. Rising unemployment over the last years, without any state welfare provisions in most instances, have resulted in the marginalisation and impoverishment of the great majority of workers. Women are affected the most, given the existing gender discrimination in our society.

Women are playing a big role in migration, and due to their overall lower social status, endure more suffering than men in the process. Traditional family structures are being changed as a result, including an increased burden for women to adapt to the change required. The fact that the women are being placed in the globalised work force does not mean they are receiving more skills as they are usually kept in the same lower work sector. Women migrant workers are mostly involved in the sex industry, entertainment, domestic work, and factory work.

### **Main Issues**

Discussions throughout the conference focused on the effects of globalisation on women in developing countries as the prominent link in addressing poverty, unemployment and the social problems caused by migration. The conference recognised the commodification of domestic workers, a trade where women are concentrated in. Traditionally, women have always borne the burden of household work, and historically, women have been migrating on their own to do household work on a contract basis in a foreign country. What is striking about this type of labour migration in its more recent forms, is that it has grown into a big money making business in which states are also quiet deeply involved.

Studies have been made on overseas employment and its impact at different levels i.e. the individual, community and national. Most of the studies highlight the negative effects of overseas employment especially on women. They reveal that families and relatives of migrant workers are the first ones to feel the impact of migration. They suffer loss of separation, loneliness, solo-parenting etc. While economically they may have benefitted from overseas employment, the earnings during the first two years usually go to the repayment of loans incurred in applying for an overseas placement. Should the worker lose her job, her family suffers as in many cases to date, women have become the sole breadwinner of the family. That is why adequate

education and self-help programs have also been identified as a service to be provided for the families and relatives of migrant workers in understanding the consequences of relying solely on the migrant worker for the family survival.

Some of the issues identified during the conference included:

- The need to address the lack of or type of information available to women migrant workers before leaving their home country and during their term of employment abroad. This includes information on health and health services available to them in their country of employment, appropriate and relevant information on the nature of work they will be performing with other contractual agreement and most importantly basic human rights that they are entitled to wherever they are. It was noted that in some instances, information is not sufficient to enable the migrant worker to understand the basic concept of her role as agreed to, let alone her legal and human rights.
- Language barriers and the lack of proper training to warrant better understanding between workers and employers, workers and government agents in host country. For this discussion, participants noted that problems confront women migrant workers at three different levels – structural, cultural and psychological. They reaffirmed the need for migrant women workers to be in regular contact with an organisation for purposes of information/ linkages and to increase her awareness and knowledge of her rights and obligations in the host country and also for counseling activities.
- Maltreatment, abuse, and exploitation of overseas women workers - exorbitant placement fees, delayed remittance, non-payment of wages, contract substitution, poor working conditions, alienation, illegal recruitments, etc. They also identified that women employed as entertainers and domestic workers are vulnerable to sexual harassment, social and moral degradation.
- Racism was also an issue highlighted by the different working groups as a factor in the ill treatment and violations of workers basic human rights. The need to recognise the intersectionality of forms of discrimination faced by women migrant workers.
- The right to join or form a union should be encouraged wherever possible. Participants also called on union leaders to encourage the participation of women in their groups to enable different perspectives and views on issues of concern.

- Education of women on the hazards of overseas employment, their role as women, their rights as workers and conscientious raising on the causes of migration should begin at grassroots' level.

The conference recognised and reiterated that women migrant workers are concentrated in either domestic or sex work. In both these major areas of employment, studies prove that they are the most vulnerable due to the lack of or non-existence of appropriate legislation that would protect or provide redress mechanisms.

Throughout the three days of the conference, participants discussed the need for the formation of a regional network of local trade unions, migrant workers associations and women's organisation. This is in the hope to strengthen alliances and build better understanding of the issues facing women migrant workers. It is believed that with a better understanding of the difficult situation of women migrant workers, local groups will be in a better position to support and develop strategies with migrant workers to address the diverse circumstances affecting the lives of migrant workers.

### **Conclusion/Outcomes**

The conference concluded that the three sectors need to work together in mobilizing support, strategizing for activities to address situations of women migrant workers and supporting each other as the first step in achieving the primary objective of recognition of women migrant workers basic human rights. To this end, participants shared information and highlighted that it is crucial to conduct educational programs to both nationals and migrant workers on social, cultural and traditional diversities of the two groups.

The need to disperse information to educate migrant workers, employers, government officials the society as a whole is crucial in addressing racism amongst the different groups.

Concerted effort must be made to support local groups in countries like Korea where local workers organisation are supporting migrant workers groups in addressing the system of employment practiced in the country. The conference has at the very least, enabled people to recognise the work each is doing at the national level and identifying partners from within the region for future support. The participants hoped to generate a wider concern, support base and participation in the just struggles and aspirations of women migrant workers throughout the region.

Participants agreed that they would take on the phenomenon of women migrants as an issue that will bond and unite them to ensure the provision of better conditions for women and the protection of their rights as human beings, as women and as workers.

At the end of the Conference, participants agreed upon a number of activities to work on at home. These include the following:

- Organise a meeting with trade unions and mainstream women's groups at national level to discuss collaborative efforts to address concerns of women migrant workers and develop strategies to address findings;
- Gather relevant information on situation of women migrant workers for the purposes of a general report that presents an updated information on the situation of women migrant workers;
- Organise consultation at national level with stakeholders to raise awareness on issues affecting migrant workers;
- Utilisation of internationally recognised days to raise the concerns of women migrant workers, i.e. International Women's Day (March 8), No Violence Against Women Day (November 25), International Human rights day (December 10), International Migrants Day (December 18), March 17 Movement etc.;
- Formation of a coalition of national organisations to address and mobilise against illegal recruitment agencies at the same time highlighting debt bondage of migrant workers. Use this body as a medium to introduce the issue;
- Open forum and protests on Violence Against Women;
- Signature campaign that highlights situation of women migrant workers in each country, result of which to be provided to host governments;
- Keep groups such as the International Migrant Alliance informed as they have the capacity to raise issues at all levels to raise awareness on the situation of women migrant workers;
- Lobby Congress, Senate, local trade unions;
- Publications – preparation of materials in simplistic form in the language of the migrant women; and
- To develop a list serve where campaign plans can be shared throughout the newly formed network.

**end**