

Back from Geneva

Good morning Singapore! It is the wee hours of the morning, here in Singapore, and indeed since my return, my bio clock is still re adjusting. A good thing too because I was able to work through the night getting HOME's annual report done in time for the AGM. The AGM is done with and I will continue (because nobody wanted my job) as President of HOME for another two years.

And this means basically, I may have the chance again, God willing, to witness the final victory for domestic workers all over world when the proposed draft of the Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers supplemented by Recommendations becomes adopted by the International Labour Conference in 2011.

The Geneva experience was an eye opener to see how tripartitism works globally. The employers, the workers and the States discussed, debated and disagreed. In that event, a vote is called and the majority rules. Fortunately for domestic workers, the African Continent and the Americas are in favour for the Convention for Decent Work for Domestic Workers. The US and Brazil spoke very vigorously for the Convention. Good for the United States for on July 4th they will be celebrating their Independence Day. The European states were also more in favour though they had some reservations over the proposed terms. Australia and the Oceania were also in favour of the Convention supplemented by Recommendations.

Asia did not shock me to recognise that treated equally like Asian to understand The Gulf States, India, Japan were all more in



Figure 1 - At the U.N. - it's awesome really!

Recommendations. They seemed to fear the lack of flexibility, if domestic workers are treated equal to other workers. I would have thought that India would have been more willing to lead the Asian pack, in the right way since monumental giants like Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru came from India. That Indonesia should not support the convention upset many Indonesian NGOs and worker groups. "I would protest when I am back", said my Indonesian friend who happened to puff between her utterances. And of course, just look at the horrendous way; some Indonesian domestic workers are being treated in other countries, just across the waters.

As for Singapore, I was not surprised at all that our state would not want a convention. It takes a Singaporean to know our way of life. Yes, our employers would be most unhappy, if domestic workers are allowed to take maternity leave or be entitled to Sunday, overtime and holiday pay. The NTUC slogan this year on their t-shirts reads 'cheaper, faster, better'. Perhaps it truly speaks of how employers would expect of their domestic workers. But after all those disgusting absurdities, I was absolutely impressed with one Singaporean, Ms Halimah Yacob who spoke with such conviction and

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passion on behalf of domestic workers that she received a standing ovation -from the worker groups and NGOs, naturally. Ironic, I must say, Singapore vs. Singapore. Among Asian countries, I was happy at least that China (maybe a fortunate mistake), Thailand and Sri Lanka supported a Domestic Worker Convention supplemented by Recommendations. The Philippines was, of course, the state championing for a Convention (the only country who did not ask for Recommendations) – and rightly so for they have the international reputation of both protecting labour and exporting labour to keep their coffers ample.

Back from Geneva and back to the ground – what does all this mean to the domestic worker? I happened to chat with a domestic worker in my neighbourhood, just last Sunday. Are you not taking a day off today? No, she said, I only get one day off in a month. How long have you worked for your employer. Seven years, she said. And why do you still want to work for them? She said ‘No choice’.

Would an international instrument give the domestic worker choice? Would international labour standards provide the children, rice for their bellies and books for their brains? Moral leadership is simply to do the right thing and it is hard for anyone to understand that a human person would not give her domestic worker a weekly rest day; a country would have laws that deny a woman her maternal rights; or a world that would support a culture of slavery, where a person has no choice but be compelled to work in conditions that deny her the right to worship her God weekly, for seven years.

So Geneva, here I come 2011, hopefully the world will be ready for a better world for all especially domestic workers.



Figure 2 - Seeing the world with one good foot better than none.