

## Stories of Women Migrant Workers

During my period of stay and work in Hong Kong, I experienced and learned many things – the way people treat a dependent or an independent woman. If you are not alert, people can cheat you at any time. The process of going abroad is difficult and confusing, and officials are callous. But even so, I think I have gained much experience as a domestic worker and my self-confidence has grown. Now I have a say in decision making. It would not have been possible if I had remained in Dharan in the small teashop.

In December 2002, my story appeared in a national daily with a huge circulation, during a media campaign on migrant workers. After that many women came to me for information and advice on the risks and benefits of foreign employment as there is no place that provides such information. Parents too come to me for advice on whether they should send their daughters to work abroad. Many women were interested in information on the Gulf countries, Korea and Japan. I shared my experiences with them but I have very limited and specific knowledge related only to domestic work in Hong Kong. I was reluctant to share my experience, problems and achievements, as our society looks down on women migrant workers, but when I was convinced that my experience would help other Nepali women to come forward and share their experiences, I took the risk to share my story.

When I look back and reflect on my life, I realize that the experience of foreign employment is different for a woman and a man. If my husband was employed in a foreign country, he would have got full family support. It is very important for a woman to be self-reliant. If she is, then she can alter her circumstances and realize her dreams. She earns the respect of her family and community. She can improve the living standard of her family and build harmonious family relationships. My husband does not shout at me now, but at times encourages me to try again if there is a good opportunity. As I have had some experience in the informal sector, I now have confidence to work in the organized sector. What also makes me happy and proud is that I am now creating a means of livelihood for four other families too.”

### *Leonor Dacula*

“I can't believe I did it. If I had someone to talk my problems over with, this would not have happened”, 21-year old Leonor Dacula, is reported to have said despairingly to a Philippines embassy official, from her prison cell in Saudi Arabia, as she awaited execution.

Leonor Dacula had killed three people in a fit of desperation. She had complained to her employers that she had been raped twice by their 16-year old son. They did not seem to care. She had no one to turn to, because she was not allowed to use the phone, her letters were confiscated, and she was often locked in the house. Driven to the edge, she killed the son and his parents in their sleep, and then tried to kill herself by slashing her wrists. Leonor Dacula was beheaded in Saudi Arabia on May 7 1993. Reportedly, not even her body could be repatriated because criminals in the kingdom have no such rights.”

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*“While working in HongKong I experienced many things - the way people treat a dependent or an independent woman. I have gained much experience and my confidence has grown. Now, I have a say in decision-making at home. My husband does not shout at me. I have bought a piece of land and four rickshaws and I am creating a means of livelihood for four other families...”*

## Stories of Women Migrant Workers

The following stories of women migrant workers give us a glimpse into their lives. They tell us why and how they

migrate for work, the problems they face throughout the migration process, how they cope, survive, transcend oppressive situations or are severely impacted. The stories though different in many ways also have many common threads and in more ways than one epitomise the plight of large numbers of women migrant workers in the region.

### Chandrakala Rai

“I was born in a remote village in east Nepal, far from the capital city of Kathmandu. My father worked in India. My mother raised my two sisters and me. I studied in my home village and went to college in Kathmandu. I dreamt about successfully completing my higher studies and supporting those deprived of education. But my family was poor and I had to abandon my education.

Being the eldest in the family, it was my responsibility to support the education of my two younger sisters and take care of my mother who was growing older. I decided to get a job that would pay well. All my efforts to get a good job were at first fruitless. Then I learned about the possibility of employment as a domestic worker in Hong Kong. I was very pleased to get this information, even though being a woman it was not easy for me to go to work in a foreign country. Despite the strong opposition of my immediate family and other relatives I somehow managed to come to Hong Kong for the first time in 1997.

My employer was a Chinese. I found everything strange and I tried hard to adjust to the new environment. I was ignorant and realized only much later that I was underpaid and the air ticket which was to be paid for by my employer had been paid by me. I was dismissed after eight months, before my contract expired.

I started working with another employer, and this was better. Fortunately, I was able to contact Far East Overseas Nepalese Association (FEONA) during this period and became a member. I began getting involved in different activities. I attended seminars and trainings and got involved in initiatives to protect migrant workers. My employer did not like this. She shouted at me, threatened to dismiss me and call the police. I continued my activities, but paid a price. The employer dismissed me from my job and did not give me my outstanding salary. I was however lucky to get assistance from FEONA to pursue my case legally. During this time I lost my dear mum for whom I was struggling and that made me reluctant to go back home. I have been working in a Nepalese employers house in Hong Kong and I am much better now.

I am an executive committee member of FEONA and the secretary of its women's wing. Through this organization I assist other Nepalese migrant workers who are in trouble and in need of help.”

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### Sushila Rai

“My name is Sushila Rai. I completed my tenth grade but I was not able to study further as we were very poor and I was needed to help at home. After my marriage, I lived with my husband in Dharan, a town in the east of Nepal. We had a very small teashop whose income was too little to sustain us. We finally had to close down the shop as people started buying goods on credit. We could not send our two children to school as we were too poor. One day a neighbour told me about going to Hong Kong to earn as a domestic worker. I went to Kathmandu for an interview and to make my passport. My husband said nothing in the beginning, but once I got my passport, he tried to stop me from going to work abroad.

I wanted to go abroad so that I could educate my children in a good boarding school, as I understood very clearly that without a good education my children would never be able to improve their lives. Secondly, I wanted to build a house so that we had a permanent roof over our heads. If my husband was unwilling to let me take a job abroad, he would have to go. But he was not prepared to go. So I decided to go on my own.

When I told my husband that I was definitely going as a domestic worker to Hong Kong, he was very angry, and called the agent and fired him. I have only defied my husband twice, once while going abroad to work and in getting my children admitted to a boarding school. I finally left.

I was given a weeks training in Kathmandu. The training was useful and it included lessons on cooking, cleaning and learning to use kitchen equipment properly. But they did not teach us the language or tell us what we should do if we had a problem. I was fortunate because I did not have major problems. But even then I think I should have got all the information I needed before I left for Hong Kong, as this information is very important for any one at any time.

The family I worked for in Hong Kong was Chinese. They were nice people. I had to take care of their child. In the beginning, language was a big problem. I could understand a little English, but they spoke only in Chinese. At first, we talked in sign language which I slowly got used to. But now I feel horrified to think of what I would have done if I had a real problem.

In the beginning, I earned a salary of Nepali rupees 15,000 (\$192) a month. After a year, this was increased to NRs. 21,000 (\$269). When my contract was renewed after two years, I started getting the official salary of NRs. 37,000 (\$474) a month. Sunday was a holiday, but I used to work overtime to earn more money for my family. I went home once for 15 days after the first two years, and then returned to Hong Kong for another two years.

I did not have a problem sending money home. I used to send it through a bank. But the money I sent was not always used as I desired. I had to spend a year's wages to pay back the loan I had taken from relatives to go to Hong Kong, at a high interest rate. If I got a cheaper loan, I could have saved more money. I really feel very bad that the money I earned through hard work was wasted. However with my earnings my son was enrolled in a boarding school, and I was also able to provide medical treatment for him. I got my daughter married – which is a huge expense. Besides that, I bought a piece of land and four rickshaws through which four other families are making their living.

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