

Focus on the Most Vulnerable: Women Household Service Workers

May 12-13, 2015 Diamond Hotel, Manila, Philippines



At the opening of the Manila Conference on Migration 2015, Philippine Red Cross Chairman Richard J. Gordon shakes hands with Saleh Ali Al Muhanadi, Secretary General of the Qatar Red Crescent Society, while Jagan Chapagain, IFRC Director for the Asia Pacific Zone, looks on.

Red Cross tackles migration issues, focuses on women household service workers

The plight of migrant workers, particularly of women household service workers, can be considered as a silent humanitarian crisis. Issues that surround their employment in foreign lands remain unheard of and only very few get the attention of the media and governments of both sending and receiving countries.

To help these women and help address the issues on labor migration, with a special focus on women household service workers, the Philippine Red Cross (PRC) in joint cooperation with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), hosted the Manila Conference on Labor Migration 2015, Focus on the Most Vulnerable: Women Household Service Workers, on May 12-13, at the Manila Diamond Hotel.



During the press conference, Chairman Gordon elaborates on the proposed humanitarian lifeline for women household service workers.

“The number of migrant workers, especially women household service workers, has become so significant. The problem has become so big that we have to start where we can win. This conference will

bring together Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies from sending and receiving countries with the aim of establishing protocols that would guide the Red Cross Movement in extending assistance to women

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Richard Gordon
Chairman and CEO
Philippine Red Cross



Jagan Chapagain
IFRC Director
Asia Pacific Zone



Saleh Ali Al Muhanadi
Secretary General
Qatar Red Crescent Society



Gwendolyn Pang
Secretary General
Philippine Red Cross

migrant workers. We aim to come up with measures on how we can engage our governments so we can better protect these most vulnerable and provide dignity and respect for them," said PRC Chairman Richard Gordon.

The conference brought together representatives from both sending and receiving countries from Asia Pacific and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, various stakeholders including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and leaders and representatives from Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) societies.

Gordon explained that the reason why the conference focuses on women household service workers is that the sector is considered the most vulnerable among migrant groups. "It is sad to hear that in pursuit of greener pastures abroad, women experience contract substitution, charging of hefty fees by recruiters, and when they arrive in their destinations, their passports and phones are confiscated, they experience beating, overwork, rape, and inhumane working conditions, among other things with little or no recourse. Some are tricked into becoming drug mules," he said.

He cited the case of Mary Jean Veloso, who was charged of drug trafficking and was almost executed in Indonesia. "Many other women migrants who suffer the same plight and abuse become invisible and simply become a statistics," said Gordon.

Statistics show that in 2013, there is an estimated 232 million

migrant workers living outside their home countries, 48 percent of whom are women. One out of five migrant workers is engaged in domestic work, of which some 43.2 million are women.

According to Philippine Red Cross secretary general Gwendolyn Pang, the Manila Conference on Migration 2015 is a key step in the mobilization of resources across Red Cross Red Crescent societies all over the world. "There is a need to coordinate a global strategy to defend the human rights of our migrant workers. Let this conference bring about agreements and strategies among our RCRC societies that can make the dream of protecting migrant workers a reality," said Pang.

Representatives from the Philippine government likewise showed their support for the conference. Linlingay Lacanlale, Undersecretary for Administration of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) congratulated the PRC and the IFRC for organizing the conference.

"The Philippines is primarily a sending country in the context of international migration," said Lacanlale. He revealed that as of DFA's latest data, there are around 9.5 million overseas Filipinos, 4 million of which are in the Americas, with approximately 2.5 million and 2 million are in the Middle East and the Asia Pacific, respectively.

On the part of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), administrator Hans Leo Cacdac said that the Philippines, in the past four years, has been committed in exerting efforts on migrant workers.

According to Cacdac, the POEA is now in the process of customizing the pre-deployment program for migrant workers. He also acknowledged the importance of strategic partnerships with other organizations to provide assistance to migrant workers who need help in repatriation, welfare services, etc.

Speaking in part for receiving countries, the secretary general of Qatar Red Crescent Society, Saleh Ali Al Muhanadi, spoke of the importance of discussions on labor migration to raise awareness on issues and to better address the gaps needed to provide the much needed assistance and protection to migrant workers.

"In terms of my country Qatar, and other so called receiving countries in the Gulf, labor migration is a contemporary phenomenon which is rapidly evolving and provoking much debate and soul searching. It is impossible to live in a country such as Qatar without interacting or touching glimpse of workers from other countries every single day," said Al Muhanadi.

According to Al Muhanadi, migration is a rapidly provoking debate in Qatar and that without the interaction with other countries, it will be impossible for the country to deal with the issue. "Much has already been said about the lack of legislation and the weak protections afforded to migrant workers. Much has also been said about the risks and vulnerabilities they face. But I feel very strongly that we should also place an emphasis on two critical and often overlooked aspects of labour migration—dignity and respect," he said.

Red Cross Movement takes a firm stand to assist women household service workers

With the mounting problems rendering women household service workers, the Philippine Red Cross (PRC), together with the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), have committed to take a firm stand on protecting them, alleviating their suffering and upholding their dignity.

In his opening address during Day 1 of the two-day Manila Conference on Labor Migration 2015, Focus on the Most Vulnerable: Women Household Service Workers, PRC Chairman Richard J. Gordon stressed that women migrant workers are isolated, invisible and vulnerable and that the Red Cross Movement will be taking a deeper involvement in the issue of migration.

“The other day was Mother’s Day. It was celebrated by at least 1.2 Filipino women abroad, working as domestic helpers or as they say, women household service workers who are invisible and vulnerable,” he said.

Gordon noted that starting from the pre-departure stage, women household service workers are already vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, such as falling prey to unscrupulous recruiters who collect exorbitant placement fees and contract substitution, among others.

When women overseas workers arrive in their country of destination, he added, another stage of their harrowing experience start because they will live in a home where the language barrier could only make things worse for



Chairman Gordon passionately delivers his opening address at the migration conference.

them. They will live in a country with different cultures, different practices and beliefs. They are prone to rape, abuse, beatings and sometimes they are not even allowed to see a doctor when they are sick. Their passports and cellular phones are taken away, further isolating them.

“And of course, when they give up because they could not handle it anymore and they escape, sometimes the employer prevents them from leaving by accusing the women household service workers of stealing. And when this happens they will be subjected to visa restriction, they could not get out,” Gordon explained.

The conference chairman stressed that current circumstances and the Red Cross tenets demand the humanitarian organization’s deeper involvement in protecting the most vulnerable.

“As Red Crossers, we must protect those who cannot protect themselves. These are the tenets of Red Cross: protect the vulnerable, alleviate human suffering and uplift human dignity. This is the time upon which we may say it is not too late to reinvent ourselves. If Henry Dunant demanded that there must be rules in war, we can demand, we can commit ourselves to rules in migration,” Gordon said.

HOW THE MANILA CONFERENCE CAME ABOUT

- 2011** - During an international conference in Geneva, Switzerland, Philippine Red Cross Chairman Richard J. Gordon spoke with Jakob Kellenberger, president of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).
- Gordon pointed out to the IFRC president that there is a severe problem in migration.
 - Dr. Fawzi Abdullah Amin, Bahrain Red Crescent General Secretary, offered to help him work on the issue.

- 2014** - Four years later, the Doha Dialogue on Migration 2014 was organized.
- The event was hosted by Qatar Red Crescent and included key external partners, including international NGOs, governments, and civil society representatives, who joined the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to address the challenges of labor migration and expatriate workers.

January 2015 – The Regional Think Tank Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue was held on January 24–25, 2015, Yangon, Myanmar

May 2015 – Manila Conference on Labor Migration 2015, Focus on the Most Vulnerable: Women Household Service Workers, May 12–13, 2015

As Sy commends Gordon on advocating for migrant workers



PRC Chairman Richard J. Gordon and Elhadj As Sy, IFRC Secretary General with *Dos por Dos* hosts, Anthony Taberna and Gerry Baja.

Philippine Red Cross (PRC) Chairman Richard Gordon and Elhadj As Sy, the Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) graced the top rating ABS-CBN show *Dos Por Dos* hosted by Anthony Taberna and Gerry Baja.

As Sy is in the Philippines for two days to attend the landmark Conference on Labor Migration, the first time such an event has been hosted by the PRC and the third in a series of such events focusing on the plight of migrant workers and the hardships they can face as they adapt to a very different life and culture.

The IFRC represents 189 Red Cross Red Crescent

societies around the world, with 17 million volunteers.

Chairman Gordon revealed that As Sy had skipped a meeting with the Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper in order to attend the conference before flying to Nepal to visit survivors of the recent earthquake, which was struck by a second serious trembler.

As Sy told the nationwide television and radio audience that he was in Manila to support the Red Cross' stand on the plight of migrant workers. "I want to pay tribute to the leadership of Chairman Gordon," he said.

"As a member of the IFRC's Governing Board, and even before that, Chairman Gordon

has been a strong voice on the international stage advocating on behalf of migrant workers. He has also lent his support to the Italian Red Cross' stand on migrants from North Africa," said As Sy.

Even though the Red Cross Red Crescent is best known for working in war zones and disasters, it also advocates strongly for people who face exploitation and victimization.

"Our humanitarian work also extends to speaking out on behalf of migrants around the world," As Sy said. "Migrants quite often find themselves facing exploitation, discrimination and xenophobia. We give a voice to the voiceless and make sure the invisible are visible," he said.

Asked about what IFRC was doing to address the issues of vulnerable migrant workers, As Sy said that it was actively seeking solutions through member societies, for example in Middle East host countries and the Gulf States.

He said the PRC is making a real difference by providing the necessary leadership to bring people together and find concrete solutions. According to As Sy, out of this dialogue will come a commitment to improve workers' rights and protections.

"Countries like Bahrain and Qatar are represented by member Red Crescent societies at the conference so they can be part of the solution. Their presence is paying tribute to both the Philippines and the Philippine Red Cross for their valuable contribution," As Sy said.

Dialogue focuses on challenges in protecting migrant women household service workers

The Manila Conference on Migration aims to come up with a solution to address the issues and challenges in protecting migrant workers, particularly women household service workers.

To lay out the issues and challenges and pave the way for dialogues, a panel discussion on “Challenges and Issues in Protecting Migrant Women Household Service Workers”, was held on the first day of the conference.

Jagan Chapagain, IFRC Asia Pacific director, chaired the panel discussion, moderated by journalist Divya Gopalan from Aljazeera. The discussion focused on the key challenges and solutions for women household service workers. “This is about changing a mindset, helping people who deserve to be treated with respect and dignity,” said Chapagain. “Our Red Cross branches as we see here in this room today, are key to engaging with community members. This is how we can contribute positively to creating this change.”

Speakers on the panel included Aasha Lama, Founder of AshahH4 Foundation Nepal, Anis Hidayat, CEO of Migrant Care,



Panelists discuss the topic “Challenges and Issues in Protecting Migrant Women Household Service Workers” during the Migration Conference’s first panel discussion. From left to right: Marilen Soliman from UN Women Philippines, Anis Hidayat from Migrant Care, Aasha Lama of AshahH4 Foundation Nepal, and Renato Villa from DFA Philippines.

Marilen Soliman from UN Women Philippines, and Renato Villa, senior special assistant at the Department of Foreign Affairs Philippines, Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers. The debate was lively and informative, with plenty of questions from the audience including Tissa Abeywickrama, Sri Lanka Red Cross

Director General and Dr. Fawzi Abdullah Amin, Secretary General of Bahrain Red Crescent.

While Villa called for increased collaboration between governments and the Red Cross Red Crescent expressing the valuable, unique “access” of Movement partners to migrant communities, both Lama and Hidayat reinforced the need to empower women before they depart their home countries in order to reduce their vulnerabilities. Soliman from UN Women emphasized the need to implement laws in order to also effectively protect women domestic workers.

“This was a very engaging discussion that was informative and it paints a clear picture of where we need to continue our work,” said Philippine Red Cross Chairman Richard Gordon. “We simply cannot be bystanders. We must be leaders in promoting change for the most vulnerable,” he said.



Participants listen intently to the discussion on the challenges and issues in protecting migrant women household service workers.

Humanizing migrant workers to combat migration issues

They are mothers, sisters, aunts, and daughters. Women household service workers are human beings that deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

However, the way that women household service workers are perceived by others can be dangerously misleading. It can fuel the exploitation and abuse that they face by their employers and others in the community.

“The media often uses labels and terminologies such as ‘illegal immigrant’”, explains Sue Le Mesurier, Migration Senior Officer of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). “The media needs to be well informed on the issues they are speaking about as it can have a real impact on the way migrants are perceived and the criminalization of migrant workers,” she added.

The second panel for the first day entitled “The Human Face of Migration” aimed to stimulate discussion and debate about the challenges in bringing a “human face” to the issue of labor migration.

As outlined in his opening remarks, Tissa Abeywickrama, Director of the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society, said the humanitarian aspects of labor migration often get lost in political, economic, and media driven dialogue. Abeywickrama urged the humanitarian community to play more of a role in ensuring that attitudes towards migrant communities are more positive, and to ensure governments view labor migration through a humanitarian lens.

The panel featured a diverse array of speakers including Jojovan Wham from the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME), and Marco Boasso, Chief of Mission from the International Organization for Migration Philippines. All speakers were able to share their personal motivations and experiences about the human stories of labor migration - all united in their



Panelists discuss the topic “Human Face of Migration” during the migration conference’s second panel discussion. From left to right: Jojovan Wham of HOME, Marco Boasso of IOM, Elcy Kieth Debildos of PRC National Youth Council, Sue Le Mesurier of IFRC, Simla Ramphul of ICRC Kuala Lumpur, and moderator Divya Gopalan.

argument that women household service workers, are human beings that deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Meanwhile, Elcy Kieth Debildos, president of the National Youth Council of the Philippine Red Cross underlined the importance of investing in youth to become advocates for change in perception.

In the context of Singapore, Wham pointed out that if all “migrant workers stopped working, the entire economy of Singapore would collapse...” - highlighting the extent of the island nation’s dependency on its migrant workforce. Wham expressed his concern that the provision of the very basic service for labor migrants remains disproportionate and underlined the fact that while the remittances domestic workers provide are well recognized, their basic human rights and needs are not. It was also noted that migrant workers in Singapore lack the power and ability to organize themselves into interest groups or even unions - highlighting a broader point that labor migrants will remain invisible if they lack the access or platform to make themselves heard.

When asked how the Red Cross Red Crescent could contribute to supporting existing

efforts and filling protection gaps in migrant worker protection, a number of suggestions were mooted including: greater advocacy with governments, stronger partnerships with grassroots NGOs, and further efforts (as cited in the example of the Australian and British Red Cross) to migrant awareness training in schools and public campaigns, which aim to defuse tension and diminish xenophobia towards migrant worker communities.

The panel discussion was followed by testimonies from two former overseas women household service workers from the Philippines. In an emotional address, the two women recounted both the struggles they had faced in employment and also the emotional aspects of fear, isolation, guilt, and separation from their families - thus bringing home the overall message of the panel that migration needs to be tackled with compassion and a people-first approach.

The panel concluded with a reminder that the job of humanitarians is to act on behalf of vulnerable migrant workers and to ensure that the human face remain visible to all those with the power to change their lives for the better.

Social media engagement: Red Cross Red Crescent Manila Conference on Labor Migration

Social media today is a key resource for information and an effective way to advocate on key issues such as labor migration. Using the main hashtag for this event - #ManilaDialogue – participants in the conference as well as IFRC, National Society staff and community members around the world, have been engaging enthusiastically on the conference discussions. Below are a few highlights from around the globe.



kate marshall @kateamarshall · 4h
IFRC SG As Sy here #ManilaDialogue @Karlsomaa @JChapagain
@ChairmanGordon @gwen_pang
Kari Isomaa



anis hidayah @anishidayah · 13h
Manila Dialogue on labor migration on the most vulnerable of migrant domestic workers. @bukan PEMBANTU @migrantcare



Photojournalist's award-winning exhibit displayed at Red Cross' migration conference

To further illustrate that women household service workers constitute the most vulnerable, an award-winning exhibit by American photojournalist Steve Mc Curry were put on display at the "Manila Conference on Migration 2015, Focus on the Most Vulnerable: Women Household Service Workers."

Fourteen photos from Steve Mc Curry's "No One Should Work This Way" exhibit were displayed at the Diamond Hotel's ground floor ballroom on May 13, the second day of the conference hosted by the Philippine Red Cross, in cooperation with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The exhibit features images of women household service workers who endured abuses and exploitations around the world. The women left their home countries to find better opportunities abroad.

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Mc Curry has been one of the most iconic voices in contemporary photography for more than thirty years, with numerous magazine and book covers, over a dozen books, and countless exhibitions around the world to his name.



Fourteen photos from Steve Mc Curry's "No One Should Work This Way" exhibit were put on display at the Manila Conference on Migration 2015.