



RESPECT Network Europe

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The Narrative of Human Rights and Labour migration Unpacked

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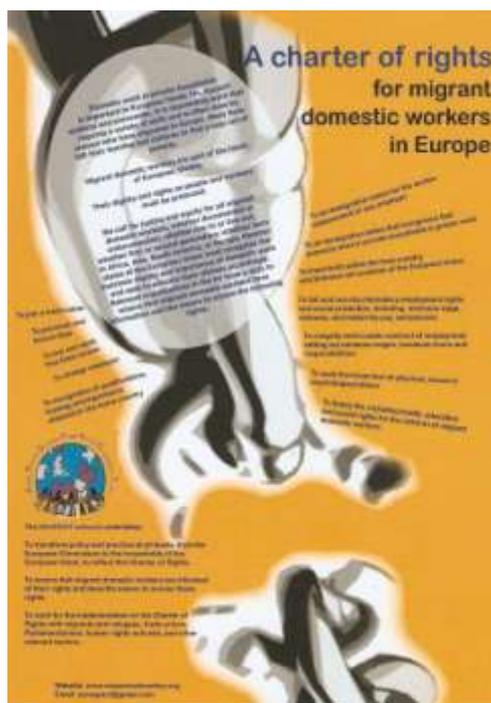
“For us...migration is a survival strategy” – this is how an undocumented migrant domestic worker in Amsterdam reflects on the migration experience. This woman has survived more than 10 years as an undocumented woman, worker and migrant. This includes very long working hours, multiple employers in one week, under-payment of wages, constant moves for safe housing, and exclusion from social security benefits – pensions, unemployment insurance, and health care; deskilling in her professional field and long term separation from her children, spouse, parents, siblings and community. In fact this reality of daily living and working conditions is the experience of both migrants and refugees, particularly those undocumented in many countries throughout Europe.

But in the narrative of the more sober mainstream media and a growing number of politicians and public legislators, this Amsterdam migrant woman, even though undocumented, is one of the lucky ones. She successfully completed the hazardous migrant journey, she has a job, she is supporting her children and family. Moreover her labour and the labour of thousands of other women and men across the different regions of the industrial world (1), including in Europe, contribute family life, to economic growth and to welfare systems by keeping our homes and offices clean, caring for our children and elderly and building our iconic modern buildings, bridges and stadiums. In some over enthusiastic commentaries this is a win-win situation; not only for the migrant workers but for development of the non-industrialized world.

For those of us living in the European Union, the debate around labour migration and human rights has become increasingly com-

plex and strident. During the past five years of the financial and economic crisis, austerity cuts have been applied as the main solution and we have witnessed, unemployment skyrocketing in countries such as Italy, Spain and Greece. These countries have been the work places of thousands of migrant workers over the last decades – but now also they are faced with unemployment and under-employment as well as with an intensifying racist and xenophobic offensive being often blamed for the crisis.

Adding to this pressure on work and daily living, migrants like the rest of us, are exposed to the breaking news and media coverage of the phenomenon of the refugee and migrant ‘boat people’ dying or being rescued in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean; the Latino migrants dying on the Mexico-US border crossing or those fleeing wars in the Middle East dying or being herded at the EU’s eastern borders.



But in the face of all of this, migrant voices assert that there is another way of analysis and response. When given opportunity to participate in Public Debates and Conferences they will raise several factors often lost or lightly discussed in the debate on the current conjuncture on migration: that the current neoliberal globalised economy is premised on the availability of mass mobile labour without rights or at best with diminished rights – for both nationals or migrant workers; that the corporate driven Trade and Investment policy of the industrialized world (including the EU) reproduces exploitative and unequal relations with the non-industrialized but resource rich world leading to mass dislocation of livelihoods; that climate change as in the 2013 Haiyan/Yolanda tsunami in the Philippines, is driving both internal and out-migration and that the changing demographics in the Global North demand the availability of low-waged no-rights labour.

But another theme is also asserted in the voice of self-organized migrants as in the undocumented migrant worker in Amsterdam, that human rights (even in their absence) are of crucial importance to defining who migrants are as human beings. In case we missed the point, migrant domestic workers wrote their own human rights

Charter way back in 2000 (2). It is both an assertion of fundamental human rights and a challenge for a new solidarity among workers (national or migrant, documented or undocumented, unionized or self-organized) and among all peoples in an era when a no-rights, less-rights workers regime is becoming the norm and when the migration of peoples is reduced to border security.

Notes and references

- (1) *"An estimated 232 million foreign-born people residing today in countries other than where they were born or held original citizenship-UN estimate 2013."*
Patrick Taran (2014), "Current State of Affairs: A Global Overview"
- (2) RESPECT Network Europe, Charter of Rights for Migrant Domestic Workers in Europe (2000)
<https://m.facebook.com/notes/respect-europe/a-charter-of-rights-for-migrant-domestic-workers-in-europe/300905499477/>
- (3) Fundamental Rights Agency (2011), "Migrants in an irregular situation employed in domestic work"
<http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2012/migrants-irregular-situation-employed-domestic-work-fundamental-rights-challenges>



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