

Start date: 18/12/06

Web Publisher Category: Refugees

Living in the Shadows: the human rights of migrants

"Migrant workers are also human beings. Why don't they pay for my work? I cannot go home because I don't have money. I have chosen to kill myself as there is no other way."

Words found on a note left by Jeong Yu-hong, a 34-year-old migrant worker from China, living in South Korea.

On this year's International Migrants' Day we launch our first comprehensive public document on migrants' rights.

The promise of a better standard of living for their families pushes many people into irregular migration, if legal avenues are not available to them. Every year thousands die while trying to reach other countries.

Many of those who arrive in a new country face further abuse and exploitation at the hands of traffickers, unscrupulous employers and state officials. Migrants who lack official status and the protection of the law are often denied the right to education, health and housing and are condemned to live and work in appalling and degrading conditions.

Women constitute almost fifty per cent of migrant workers, and are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, including sexual violence. Children, too, face particular hardships and are at risk of exploitation due to their young age, immaturity and, in some cases, lack of parental support.

Migrants are often described, by some politicians and the media, as criminals, economic burdens, security threats and even a risk to public health. The reality is, however, that many economies have come to rely on migrants who are prepared to work in degrading and dangerous jobs with little security and low wages.

This unrecognized, unappreciated, and undervalued workforce now drives a significant part of the global economy. A migrant worker is increasingly being viewed as a commodity or a unit of labour, a "temporary service provider" who can be shuttled around the world at will. This attitude lacks any recognition of a migrant worker's human rights.

Migrants' rights are human rights; and governments, communities, employers and individuals need to do more to uphold and protect them.

The Amnesty International (AI) Primer on the human rights of migrants presents an overview of the issues, and outlines how government policies

and practices should protect migrant workers' human rights at all stages in the cycle of migration across the world.

It highlights some of the human rights violations that many migrants face, and sets out an agenda for campaigning for migrants' rights, including calling on States to ratify and implement the Migrant Workers Convention. It also celebrates migrant workers' contributions to both the host country and to their families in their countries of origin.

Dispelling fear and countering misinformation are a vital part of promoting migrants' rights. At the heart of AI's proposed agenda for campaigning for migrants' rights is a call to treat all migrants with full respect for their human rights and human dignity.

"This silent human rights crisis shames our world...Migrants are part of the solution, not part of the problem. They should not be made the scapegoats for a vast array of social ills."

Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General in an address to the European Parliament, 29 January 2004

Case study

Domestic worker exploited and raped in Kuwait.

N.R., a 28-year-old Indian national, told Amnesty International that she had worked as a domestic worker in Kuwait for three years. During this time her Kuwaiti employer had not allowed her out of the house.

For three days she was sent to work for a relative of her employer. The relative raped her and she became pregnant. After she gave birth she was taken to the deportation section of the women's prison where she was detained with her baby daughter.

Her employer gave her passport and airline ticket to the police, but the police said that she could not leave the country with her baby without the consent of the baby's father. N.R had been unable to tell the police where the man lived because she had never been allowed out of her employer's house and so did not know the location of the house where she had been raped.

When AI interviewed her in July 2004, she and her daughter had been detained in the deportation centre since December 2003 and her status remained unclear.

Take action: Protect the rights of all migrants in South Korea

Read the full text [Living in the Shadows – a primer on the human rights of migrants](http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGPOL330062006) [http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGPOL330062006]

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Boat carrying immigrants escorted by an Italian Coast Guard vessel, Lampedusa, near Sicily. © AP



Migrants' clothing caught in razor wire as they tried to cross the frontier to Spain from Morocco at the Spanish enclave of Melilla, October 2005. © José Palazón/PRODEIN



Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong sleep on a pedestrian walkway on their day off. © Mark Henley/PANOS



Migrant workers demonstration in South Korea. © AI



Urns containing ashes of migrant workers who have died in Korea. © AI



Migrant Worker in a factory, South Korea. © AI