

Swindlers Prey on Desperate Refugees

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Women uprooted by Mindanao fighting hoodwinked into work for abusive employers. Going home and staying home was all 17-year-old Aliya (not her real name) said she wanted – even though she'd only be going back to an evacuation centre in Maguindanao, 160 kilometres southwest of here.

Having spent more than six months in Davao City as house help for a rich Filipino-Chinese family, Aliya has had enough.

"I cannot bear my work anymore," she told the Philippine Human Rights Reporting Project.

Aliya arrived in the city after a woman claiming to be a domestic servant recruiter – whom Aliya identified as "Betty" – offered her chance to escape the misery of the evacuation centre in the village of Bagoenged last July.

She and her family had effectively been on the road, moving from one centre to another for the past nine years because of fighting. Having first lost their home, her father then lost his job as a fish trader and the family ended up relying on financial support from their relatives.

"Our lives were very miserable, all of my brothers and sisters dropped out of school," recounted Aliya, the second of seven children.

Their cycle of hopelessness in one evacuation centre after another made Betty's offer very persuasive. Betty promised Aliya a job in Davao from where she could start to send money back to her family.

Her monthly salary would be 2,500 Philippines pesos, PhP (55 US dollars). Social security benefits were promised on top.

Aliya says she only saw Betty once.

But first – as so often seems to be the case – Aliya's family had to pay upfront. Her father gave Betty an envelope containing 3,500 PhP, a huge amount given their desperate circumstances.

Aliya little imagined that her life in Davao City would be worse than living at the evacuation centre.

She spoke of how she worked seven days a week, rarely got a day off and went to bed at 11 pm only to be woken four hours later. In the morning, she would look after the personal needs of her employers and tend to their children in the afternoon and evenings.

After her first month, she said she burst into tears when she discovered that her salary was only 700 PhP.

She confronted her employer who then threatened to turf her out onto the streets. Depressed at the prospect of going back to Maguindanao virtually penniless after her family had paid out so much to find her work, she remained with the family in Davao another five months being paid the equivalent of less than half a dollar a day.

"Our lives are desperate in Maguindanao; we have no security and there is fighting always. We don't know who we should be asking for help," said Aliya.

One of her friends from the evacuation centre was also promised work by Betty. Suleika was luckier and managed to find a better job in Tagum City.

But even then, she only receives a meager 1,000 PhP a month.

"I envy Suleika," said Aliya, "I wish too I could work in Tagum."

Conditions in the cramped evacuation centres which are neither policed nor protected have made them attractive to unscrupulous domestic servant recruiters like Betty, according to the Mindanao Migrants Center for Empowering Actions, a non-government organisation that promotes the welfare of migrant workers in southern Philippines.

"Hopeless situations in conflict areas push families to send off those family members who can work – and these then suffer abuse because employers often know there is nothing for these people to go back to," said Inorisa Sialana, the centre's executive director.

According to Sialana, the number of migrant workers arriving in cities like Davao, General Santos, Digos, and Tagum soars every time there is fighting between the Philippine Armed Forces and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

Most of these migrants come from the provinces of North Cotabato, Lanao Del Norte and Lanao Del Sur. They work mostly as domestic helpers or shop assistants, says Sialana.

Back in Davao, city councillor Angela Librado-Trinidad, author of the Women Development Code, a landmark local law for the protection of women's rights, admits there are still "grey areas" which prevent its full implementation when it comes to domestic servants.

Another problem, says Librado-Trinidad, is that the authorities cannot act on reported abuses against these workers because they are reluctant to make formal complaints to the Department of Labor and Employment, which is responsible for investigating labour malpractice.

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