

(Lina's Speech)
UnionsNSW Anti-Poverty Week Event
19 October 2017

Good evening and thank you for inviting Asian Women at Work Inc to this event. Let me start differently for a change. I'll sing you a little song -

I think when I see all those pictures about
Of children without any food
How hard it must be for their mothers at home
Who just don't know what to do
With children so thin and their ribs sticking out
A terrible plea in their eyes
I tremble to think what starvation is like
But I do try to sympathise
You've got to do more than that
You've got to do more than that
For sympathising is all very well
But you've got to do more than that

This is a song I was teaching yesterday to our Learning English through Songs class – and was a good way to start a conversation about poverty with a group of Chinese and Vietnamese migrant women. In that group, we had –

Trang, a 64-year old Vietnamese woman who came to Australia 3 years ago on a contributing parent visa. She works in a vegetable farm in Leppington. Gets paid \$12 an hour and works 10 to 11 hours a day. Everyday, she pays \$15 for her transportation to the farm. The driver of the van that takes them gets paid \$1 for every person he transports to work by the farm owner, in addition to the \$15 he collects from Trang and other farm workers. Trang lives with her children and contributes to the family's daily expenses.

We also had Thuy, a 38-year old Vietnamese woman who came to Australia nearly a year ago. She worked for 6 months in a Cabramatta nail shop and got paid \$200 a week because she was on training, according to the boss. Recently, she found another job in a nail and beauty shop in the City where she gets paid \$140 for a 10-hour work-day. She said she wants to save money to be able to buy a washing machine because she has been washing her husband's and son's and her clothes by hand for nearly a year now!

We talked about the meaning of the song – and I said that I learned that song when I was a student activist in the 80s – and that particular part was about poverty in Africa.

“Oh, I am glad it's not in Australia”, said one of the Chinese woman in the group. “I hope it will never happen in Australia”.

Asian Women at Work Inc is a Sydney-based community organisation with a membership of over 2000 Asian – mostly Chinese and Vietnamese - migrant women workers. Our aim is to empower women individually and as a community to address the issues they face, improve their quality of life and facilitate their participation in Australian society.

To the many migrant women workers in our network and those we encounter in our outreach activities, Australia is where their dreams can come true, the place to rebuild lives and have a better future for their family and for themselves. To the women we work with, this has often not been the case.

As we sit here, a migrant woman worker working in a nails and beauty shop in Hurstville will be paid \$10 an hour. Later in the day, she will probably spend another hour tidying up and getting the shop ready for the next day but will not be paid for it. The boss expects her to do that.

As we sit here, a meat factory worker will be working in freezing temperature, without proper protection. She might be wearing gloves – gloves that she bought herself because they are not supplied to them.

As we sit here, there will be a migrant woman worker being sent by Job Services Australia to a workplace that is often a total mismatch to her skills. Three months later, this woman will be at Job Services Australia again, looking for work and being sent to another unsustainable job.

As we sit here, there will be a migrant woman worker who was injured at work trying to explain to Centrelink that she is sick, and therefore cannot work and therefore “can you please help me”, she will say. Like what happened to Helen, our member, she was told “You are sick because you think you are. Stop thinking that you are sick!” Helen gave them a doctor certificate stating that she was not fit to work and to drive a car but they rejected it and insisted that she go to work.

As we sit here, there will be migrant women workers being asked to sign in and sign out when they go to the toilet. And in this particular workplace, many of the women have urinary tract infection for trying not to go to the toilet in case they lose their jobs.

As we sit here, there will be migrant women workers receiving phone messages telling them that they have or not have work tomorrow by their job agencies. We have a Chinese member who received the same text saying “report to work today” for 4 straight years.

Many of you would have heard these stories before but we keep on repeating them like a broken record because they continue to happen. Family and community lives are affected by these situations. Women’s self-esteem are eroded by these situations. Dreams turn into nightmares by these situations.

From day one in this country, migrant women workers wanted meaningful and sustainable employment. But our women say that they accept bad treatment because they don't have a choice. Even though they are hardworking and bring many skills, qualifications, and experience to the workplace, much of the time these are not recognised in Australia. They take any job they can because the alternative – no job and no income – is not an option for them and for their families. If they speak out or complain they might lose their jobs because there are many others desperate for work too, so they think it is better to keep quiet. They feel like they are disposable workers. The impact of their precarious jobs is not just felt in the workplace. For many of them, their life is a constant juggle between work and family responsibilities, especially when they are also raising children as migrant working mothers.

Migrant women workers make a big contribution to Australia. They work hard. They share their skills. They are proud to be Australians.

But the problem is, the system is broken and it is breaking the lives of migrant workers. The system is broken and is perpetuating the kind of poverty that deprives migrant workers the right to be treated with dignity and respect, right to have a job, the right to have a safe and harassment-free workplace, the right to fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work, the right to have regular hours and security at work.

Going back to the conversation we had in the group, the women said that of course, their lives here is much better than when they were in Vietnam or in China. But it doesn’t mean that they don’t feel “poor”, that they don’t feel “poverty”. Their kind of poverty is the poverty of lack of opportunities, of services, of resources.

They said that their being “poor” is hidden because they are able to provide for their basic needs – food, shelter and clothing. But they are just keeping afloat and one crisis away from the poor box. What if they lose their job, what if they don’t get paid on time? What if they get sick and can’t work anymore?

They said that they also have dreams, aspirations to improve their lives but the government is not interested in them, to invest on them. They suffer from the poverty of opportunity and as one Chinese said there, the issue of being able to learn English is very basic but it is not taken seriously by the government. Being deprived to learn English they said keep them in poverty,, keep them poor.

They understand that they don’t get the minimum wage or the award wage but they don’t understand why the government cannot stop wage theft from happening. They said this is like robbing the poor to make them poorer.

I must have exhausted them because finally they said, can we now sing “Yesterday Once More”, the song they’ve been practising to sing at our AGM in November. Which led me to ask what do you do for entertainment? “Oh, we have karaoke at home, or we take turns visiting each other, or we take advantage of the \$2.50 family tickets on Sunday if we want to go somewhere. One of them said that after 20 years in Australia, it was only last week that she had been to a cinema to watch a movie. We can’t afford to go out to fancy restaurants or watch concerts like other people, they said.

I got an email on Monday about anti-poverty week workshops. It said “come along to our interactive day focusing on how to save money on your bills, cost of living in the home, and connect to services that can help with financial literacy. There will also be opportunities to meet key service providers and make new friends”. This is all very well, but we’ve got to do more than that. The last thing we want is to normalise poverty, to accept the way things are.

Asian Women at Work believe that the fight for workers’ rights is a fight against poverty.

We also believe that the union and community together is power. Together we can fight poverty.

Let me end with the other part of the song:

The men with the truncheons and helmets are out
They’re trying to break up the mob
Of people whose skins are just coloured a bit
And all they want is a job
It’s only for whites that’s the sign they put up
But it isn’t even their land
Equality is such a difficult word
But I do try to understand
You’ve got to do more than that
You’ve got to do more than that
For understanding is all very well
But you’ve got to do more than that.

Thank you.