



Statement of the Asian Ecumenical Migrants Advocacy Network (AEMAN) Pre-Assembly Forum Meeting

The Rights and Dignity of Asian Migrant Workers in the Diaspora

26–28 September 2023 | CMS College, Kottayam, India

(1) The Asian Ecumenical Migrants Advocacy Network (AEMAN) of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) in collaboration with the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) held a Pre-Assembly event on ‘The Rights and Dignity of Asian Migrant Workers in the Diaspora’ at the Rev. Joseph Fenn Hall, CMC College, Kottayam, India from 26th to 28th September 2023. About 50 participants, representing constituent members of CCA, ecumenical organisations and networks, theological institutions, grassroots organisations, and local churches, attended the event.

(2) The event began with a thematic address on the Rights and Dignity of Asian Migrant Workers in the Diaspora” in which the numerous issues surrounding labour migration and its impacts on the families were highlighted, with examples from Kerala and other sending states. There were biblical reflections on each day on the themes of “Affirming God’s Will: Justice and Hospitality for Restoration and Renewal”, “The Exodus Narrative: Liberation and Journey to Freedom as Attaining the Fullness of Life”, and “Jesus as the Migrant: Incarnation and Solidarity in his Dwelling with Creation”, which underpinned the discussions, deliberations and the action plan formulated at the event.

(3) The challenges faced by Asian migrant workers in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context in relation to labour market trends and prospects, ethical recruitment, fair migration, systematic inequalities, the impact of migration on the family, as well as return and reintegration were some of the areas that were highlighted at this gathering. It was noted that protecting and promoting the personal security, dignity and rights of Asian migrant workers, the majority of whom are unskilled/low-skilled, have proven to be persistent and burning realities, needing urgent and effective interventions by the Asian churches and ecumenical movements. The role of the churches in advocacy and accompaniment throughout the migration process is pivotal, especially in view of CCA having identified an urgent need to engage with representatives from the countries of origin and destination, and the service providers, to advocate for and promote a culture of human rights and human dignity, to end exploitation, abuse and violence, and to promote the empowerment of the most vulnerable of the migrant workers.

Our Concerns

(4) Although a fair number of reforms have been initiated and implemented after over half a century of labour migration to the Arabian Gulf, the major issues have more or less remained the same: undocumented unskilled and low-skilled migrant workers, unethical practices of unscrupulous recruitment agents, intermediaries, and employers, unfair contracts, debt bondage, wage theft, substandard living and working conditions, inability to access healthcare and justice services, exploitation, poor grievance redress

mechanisms, violence, abuse and trafficking, A majority of the migrant workers continue to be employed as domestic workers, who are often denied the benefits of reforms to labour laws in the countries of destination, leaving them vulnerable and without redress.

(5) The issues of migrant workers are human rights issues, which are ordinarily the domain of governments and international organisations. However, interventions by national, regional and international agencies, including churches, ecumenical networks and civil society organisations are vital in finding effective contextual solutions, through shared resources, information/lived experiences, technical knowledge/skills, etc. The migrant workers' issues intersect with the issues of women, children, fatherhood, health, geopolitics, education, economy, and ecology. As they are human issues, the personhood of the migrant worker must form the focal point for collaborative efforts for effective strategies.

(6) Migrant workers' families too require support and solidarity. The mental and emotional stresses associated with migration deeply impact the members of the families and children in particular. The repatriation and reintegration of returning migrant workers with their families and communities is another area of concern. Strategies need to be formulated alongside programmes for the protection and promotion of rights-based migration practices by all stakeholders in keeping with international standards and norms.

(7) Another concern highlighted is that the majority of the countries of origin and destination are yet to ratify the United Nations Convention for the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families and the various International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions and non-binding guidelines. The immediate need for all governments in the Asia region to ratify and uphold the spirit of these Conventions must be underscored.

We the participants of AEMAN hereby urge CCA and its constituencies:

1. To incorporate the theme of labour migration into the various thematic programmes of CCA and its constituencies, thus placing emphasis on the universality and urgency of the issues involved.
2. To prepare and make available biblical and theological study material on labour migration and to provide a theological basis for accompaniment, solidarity, and hospitality to the migrants throughout the migration process.¹
3. To facilitate the sourcing of alternative funding and resources to strengthen the capacity of local churches to advocate for migrant workers' rights effectively. This includes monitoring and evaluating the programmes to improve and measure their progress and quality.
4. To strengthen the existing ecumenical networks of CCA to enable the churches in the host and sending countries to unite in their service of liberation² to the migrant workers and their families.
5. To encourage and empower churches to follow in Jesus' footsteps of becoming incarnational societies, living in solidarity with migrant workers and learning to yield to God's Holy Spirit for the transformation of the interactive spaces so created into sacramental spaces.³
6. To facilitate training in counselling ministries to serve the psycho-social needs of migrant workers and their families.

¹ "Hospitality is a sacred duty and an identification with the very nature of God. Love for the stranger (philoxenia) is to overcome the fear of the stranger (xenophobia). It is only when those in the fringes are called for and brought in, God's house becomes full and hospitality becomes justice for the powerless." – Rt. Rev. Dr. Daniel S. Thiagarajah – "Affirming God's Will: Justice and Hospitality for Restoration and Renewal".

² Yahweh being the initiator and executor of the liberation journey of the Israelites; exodus from slavery to freedom, dependency to independence. Yahweh, who is present among his people, establishes a new social order of justice and compassion sustained by being in a covenant relationship with God. – Rev. Prince Devanandan

³ Rev. Dr. P G George