

# **International Conference on Gender, Migration and Development**

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Presentation at a workshop on

## **Gender responsive action for migrants caught in Crisis and conflict situations**

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## Personal presentation

My name is Bo Hansson and I'm ordained priest in the Church of Sweden but now working, since the beginning of this year, together with my wife for the Middle East Council of Churches in the Gulf, which means Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Oman. Saudi Arabia is not a place we yet can get access to.

I've also served as a parish priest in Sweden and for Church of Sweden abroad in Poland in the beginning of the eighties and in Egypt in the beginning of the nineties. One year I taught new coming fugitives in our language and about our society and the rules and laws of our country. Almost three years I spent in a prison of investigation, but don't worry I was one of those who had keys. Nine years I worked in the Church with Human Resource matters where one very important task was gender questions and improvement of equality between women and men. In this field we also worked against all kinds of discrimination. One of the most difficult questions in this field was discrimination against homosexuals, which today is highly on the agenda in Europe where many countries now discuss the possibility of marriage between persons of the same sex. You can surely understand the difficulties in a church environment.

When I just too short time ago received the request to come to Manila and speak about Gender responsive action for migrants caught in crisis and conflict situations I got a little worried because there is so little written about this subject and my experience is limited.

## **UAE Population**

I live in Abu Dhabi in the UAE, a very special country and I will try to keep myself there and not bother so much about the rest of the Gulf. UAE has today approximately 5 million inhabitants. The population rose from 1995 – 2005 with 75% and it's expected to go on for a long time.

Because of the explosive development in UAE there is now a lack of labour force, which means that more and more are coming. You can see them arriving to the airports in huge groups waiting to be taken over by their employers. Yes, very often this is the situation. They are taken over, tied up by long contracts, some employers take and keep, though it's forbidden, their passports and very often they soon realize that their dreams about a better life didn't come through.

150 nations are represented and most of them come from:

India	1.400.000
Pakistan	765.000
Bangladesh	550.000
Philippines	265.000
China	200.000

About 700.000 are in the construction business. Very many of the females are domestic workers. The huge shopping malls have lots of employees, schools, hospitals and offices need to be cleaned. The streets, beaches and parks occupy a lot of workers and so on.

## **Accommodation**

Most of the construction workers end up in labour camps. Outside Dubai you can visit Sonapur a camp with about 200.000 men and a new camp is under construction and according to rumours estimated to receive up to 1.000.000 men and only men. In Abu Dhabi a new area for 850.000 people is under construction but there is meant to be cheap accommodation for couples and families with low wages. Only 250.000 places for single men are planned.

## **Gender balance**

Of the 5 million inhabitants in UAE less than one fifth are Emiratis. Of them there are about as many women as men so there is a balance. Among the migrant workers are the figures about 75% men and 25% women so there is no balance at all. Of course

some have the possibility to bring their families, but the raise of accommodation costs is so high that lots of people have to send their loved ones back home again and find a bed space for themselves. It can be a bed in a room with 10 – 12 others. In one labour camp I saw rooms with 32 bed spaces with no mattresses or pillows on the beds.

## **Alone coming women**

So what happens to women who come alone? Some have got good employers providing decent wages and working conditions. Most probably they will get a bed space or some other shared accommodation. There are not very many labour camps for women but they exist for unskilled workers and as far as I've seen the conditions there are better than in the male camps, maybe because women often are more concerned to create a home.

Many of the women however have employments as domestic workers where they live in with the family they serve. Very often they live a limited life. If they are lucky they may have a weekly day off being able to meet with others in the same situation. If they are unlucky they might be locked up when the family leaves the house, they might be victims of all kinds of abuse from bad words to rape. Unknowing of their rights they might not dare to complain and if they manage to escape the employer often report them for theft or any other crime.

## **Safe houses**

The Indian, Sri Lankan and Philippine embassies have safe houses in which they can find shelter but with 60 – 90 women living together in limited space the conditions are not the best and the worry about the future doesn't make it easier. Some can be helped with repatriation by the embassies, others by Churches and other organizations. Not all want to go home. They might not be welcomed by their families since they were an important part of the family's income sources or face even worse living conditions.

## **Crisis and conflict**

UAE has not been exposed to political crisis or war conflicts so there is no experience of what might happen. Knowing something about what happened in Kuwait and Iraq during the Gulf war and in Lebanon during the recent Israeli invasion I don't dare to think about what might happen in UAE with such an increasing number of migrant workers.

In Kuwait, Iraq and Lebanon the whole infrastructure was destroyed. Migrant workers left or tried to leave the regions and they were not only unskilled labour but also well educated physicians, engineers and so on. The consequences in UAE so totally dependent on migrant workers of all kinds would be devastating.

## **Situation full of risks**

There has as said been no crisis or severe conflict situations in UAE, but if the development goes on the way it's expected to there is a ticking bomb. You can't go on treating people worse than animals. The living conditions I've seen in labour camps are sometimes worse than what European laws on prevention of cruelty towards animals would allow. You can't keep 500.000 men in a labour camp and keep families separated year after year without expecting tensions. You can't expect people not to receive their wages for months without protests that might grow into violent conflicts.

## **Good efforts**

UAE has, after international criticism from labour- and human rights organisations and pressure from mainly EU and USA started to take action in order to improve the conditions of the workers. The knowledge that the country is totally dependent on migrant workers has also helped. Here are some examples.

- A special court for labour conflicts is coming
- Increase the number of governmental inspectors to secure that labour laws are followed
- Health care for all migrant workers (employer's responsibility)
- Develop methods to secure that wages are being paid
- Labour camps not reaching minimum standard being closed and employers demanded to offer new accommodation
- UAE has ratified the conventions against racial discrimination, children's rights and against discrimination of women
- Law that forbids employers to retain workers passports
- Minimum age for work is 15 years
- Governmental draft law with the purpose of including farm workers and domestic workers in the federal laws on labour conditions (If it's realized it will be the first in the region)
- Law that forbids underage camel jockey trafficking
- Plans to introduce Human rights in the educational system as a subject of its own

## **Actions**

- We can see the success of the international pressure on UAE and this has to continue also in other countries where human rights are not respected. As long as human rights are not respected in our world we need to high lighten these matters with all our voices.
- It is important not only to complain but also to confirm the good efforts been taken. We have to consider that the countries in the Gulf have experienced a tremendous development in a very short time and remember how long time it's taken for countries like mine to develop a system that still has lacks in this field.

- We also need to highlight the need of education on human and labour rights in both sending and receiving countries. Nobody should be sent away without basic knowledge of their rights and this is a responsibility the sending countries have to take.
- We need to see women as subjects and not objects also in the educational situation. That women have been oppressed by patriarchal systems doesn't mean they don't have abilities to take care of themselves. There is a female power that very often men lack.
- We need to create meeting places for migrant domestic workers where they can get support and be part of networks so that if they are missing somebody asks for them and take actions. The Churches are often such meeting places but where Hindu women without temples meet is unknown to me.
- We need to encourage Churches and other NGOs to take more responsibility for the education on human- and labour rights.

These conclusions are the same for as well peaceful situations as for those in crisis and conflict. They are not possible to separate from one another.