

An Exclusive Interview:

“Women are not stereotyped, they are strong” - Leila Rispens-Noel

(Ms. Leila Rispens-Noel presently working with the Oxfam Novib came to the Netherlands in October 1979. Devoted to her work Leila is very familiar in the world of migration and development beyond the boundary of the Netherlands. Wherever she goes, whether it is an international conference or meetings or training, she is seen surrounded by people and talking on various issues. Leila, a Filipino is happily married to her Dutch husband, Mr. Wim Rispens and has two sons. Here is an interview of Leila at her Oxfam Novib office on 12 March. The interview was taken by BASUG President Bikash Chowdhury Barua)



Q- How do you look as a successful migrant woman at the situation of other migrant women here in the Netherlands ? Do you think that living in a western country like the Netherlands the migrant women enjoy all rights a woman supposed to?

Leila - We have to take into consideration the socio-economic situation and status of migrant women here in the Netherlands. For instance, if they don't have a residence permit, then their rights and duties are limited. On the other hand many migrant women, despite higher education face problem in finding a job that would commensurate with their education. Even the percentage of Dutch women in labour sector is extremely small compared with other European countries. The situation is no different with the migrant women. Not many of them are gainfully employed. This is my observation. Of course, there are many barriers too, such as education system, language problem etc.

All big things are not always the ideal ones; small things when done properly and successful, can make a lot of difference-Leila.

Q- When the question of women rights come all point at the third world countries. But critics say, women in the west do not still enjoy equal rights like men. What is your comment?

Leila- There is always marginalisation of women in all sectors, in all countries - western or in developing countries. Even women doing the same job like men usually receive relatively lower salary compared to men. This is already one form of discrimination.

Q-When this is the situation of women in countries like the Netherlands, don't you think that the idea of establishing women's rights in countries like Bangladesh is nothing but an utopia? Can we achieve this in our life time?

Leila - It will be achieved if you work for it. If you don't do anything about their situation you can not achieve anything. There is still a great disparity in the world between men and women - and at all levels, in decision making, in the work place and even in relationship between men and women. It has nothing to do whether you are in the Philippines or in a western country. Interestingly the Philippines has the highest number of women occupying higher position, women in the Philippines are in a better position than many developed countries so to speak. But that does not mean that there is no problem between men and women in the Philippines. Lesser educated women have problems. On the other hand, in the Netherlands there are many highly educated women who have no choice but to stop working when they get married and get children or for other reasons, which is again not so much of a problem in countries like the Philippines. There you have family to help you or you can higher a baby sitter which is very expensive here in the Netherlands. Here you can not rely on your family to take care of your children.



Q- How a migrant woman can help support in regard to the establishment of women's rights in her country of origin. What Oxfam Novib is doing in this regard?

Leila- That's a very good question...because Oxfam Novib stimulates migrant women to actively involve in the development of their countries of origin. I think migrant women are in a good position to share the values, the skills that they learn here with women of their countries of origin. They can connect with women in own country of origin and fight with them, struggle with them and back in the Netherlands they can inform the Dutch public about the situation of women of their country of origin. They can lobby about for instance, work situation, financial accessibility. It is already known that women have no access to funding or financial services. So they can help them lobby, or influence



policies in their own country of origin and in the Netherlands too. So women will have access to financial services for instance, through microfinance program. They can tell policy makers about the situation of woman in their own country. But at the same time I think that it is also too much to ask from migrant women but they can do something about it no matter how modest it is.

Q- Can an individual migrant woman make any contribution to this goal –does it make any difference?

Leila - Oh yes, if you have a contact in your own home town, if you are alone or small group then you connect with local group in your own home town. You can tell compatriot about the situation of women in your own country for example in Bangladesh. They can also support livelihood programme or women capacity building program. That makes a lot of difference.

Q- You are working with Oxfam Novib. What action Oxfam Novib take to improve the situation of women in countries like Bangladesh?

Leila- Oxfam-Novib gives a very high priority to gender mainstreaming and economic justice for women. In all our programmes our aim is that the project should also benefit women and they should have an important role in decision making process. So, in all our projects we always look at the gender component.

***How should a woman be able to emancipate herself?
I can speak for myself. I have to break my own glass ceiling, because nobody will do it for me. But when you break that glass ceiling you have to be aware that you might get splinters - Leila***

Q- In Bangladesh women are still becoming victims of acid throwing, non-payment of dowry, rape and religion etc. Has Oxfam Novib taken any action or programme to improve the situation in Bangladesh?

Leila- We take women issue in a global perspective. Novib supports local counterparts and it should be the work of our local counterparts to address the issues locally. And if you talk about special campaign for Bangladesh then my answer is, we don't have! But in our strategic plan, we will seriously address gender issues in the Netherlands and globally. We give special attention to gender. So I presume in Bangladesh we have counterparts who are engaged in such activities and as I said, gender would be an important component in any project that we support.



Q- When we look at you we consider you as a successful migrant woman. Did you face any problem when you first came to the Netherlands to reach this stage?

Leila- I tell you something. I came from a family background where at home the difference between man and woman was not a big issue. Being the oldest in the family of 8 with 4 brothers and 3 sisters I took the responsibility of the whole family when my father died at the age of 49. Actually, when I was still a child, I did most of the household chores which were normally assigned to boys. Mostly, heavy works. I rarely played with dolls or with girls in the neighbourhood; instead I enjoyed gathering firewood in the forests and walked several kilometres away to fetch drinking water. I assumed my father's (as breadwinner) including making decisions for the family if needed. I was not always conscious of my being a woman but being a person in the first place. To me there is no difference between a man always worked did not problems being a woman. coming to the Netherlands that I got seriously involved with women activities. When I was in the Philippines, I used to work with men, farmers, fishermen, group of young activists and most of them were men. When I came to the Netherlands I brought that kind of concept that I am a person and that is why I was never a member of any all-women organisation. I can speak out my mind easily, in a group of men. But later I saw here some women group were specifically catering to the need of women.

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and a woman. I with men and I encounter because of my It was only after

Then I started to work with them and beginning to understand their problems. My awareness actually in terms of women issue grew deeper when I started studying migration and development and that is how I actually became committed to gender issues because I started to see the discrepancy between men and women.

Q- BASUG is going to organise a discussion on women issues. Do you think that such discussion can bring any positive results and if yes, what is your expectation?

Leila - I think you have set the objectives of the conference by inviting some speakers from Bangladesh. I expect that you would give more attention on the situation of Bangladeshi women. Here in the Netherlands what will outcome- I think it is you who best answer. Because in first inviting Bangladesh and I just hope through the there will be a deepening of on the situation of women in Not only deepening of on the situation but also you what kind of responses, practices that you would like Bangladesh.



be the can give the place, you are community conference understanding Bangladesh. understanding can identify policies and to change in

Bangladesh is one kind of an – because in one hand it is the microfinance, you have Grameen, BRAC- all the largest successful microfinance institutions. Financial accessibility should be there. But on the other hand, women there are still marginalised. I am not very familiar with Bangladesh situation. But probably in your case you look at cultural context, what are the barriers? Are women able to empower themselves? Is their only concerns about livelihood? But I think based on my knowledge in the presentation of BRAC access to financial services should be available for women to be able to start their own livelihood. This is one of the areas woman can work for their empowerment. So I hope that participants would be more engaged in women issues in Bangladesh.

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Q. You know that Bangladesh is predominantly a Muslim country. Do you think that religion plays a role in emancipation of women in Bangladesh?

Leila- May be it plays a role and again I am not familiar with religion in Bangladesh. I don't know what your religion tells about the position of women. For example, woman has a lesser role in a Catholic society. They can not be a priest. But in a secular society like the Philippines religion is not a hindrance for women to move forward, but usually it is the socio-economic situation and level of education that play important role. Again although woman in the Philippines work hard their contribution is not properly calculated in terms of income. Household work of woman is not seen as contribution to household income. In rural areas there is a great discrepancy between man and woman. Women should have access to capital so that they can work for their economic independence.

Q. As woman what do you think on International Women's Day in 2007?

Leila - I can't deny that women movement has progressed through the years. In many countries, we gained the right of suffrage. But there is still a sort of grey areas in terms of economic justice to women. Millions of women still do not have enough income to support themselves. They are still dependent on the income of their husbands. When I came to the Netherlands I thought that I must find a job right away. My husband asked, why. I didn't say anything. But deep inside I thought if my husband divorces me one day what would happen to me? That is the situation of many in the Netherlands who are living mostly women who are divorced or have to take away with everything.

I think BASUG is making the right choices involving Bangladesh communities in the development of their country - Leila.

would happen to women. That is why in poverty level are single parent. They

Then the pressure to find a job and combine with caring for children after divorce become too much for some of the women. It is the same situation in developing countries. The husband develops his own career and the wife remains at home and if the husband abandons her, she needs to start from zero. On the other hand, women are also looked as stereotyped which is not correct. Women are considered as weak. But I know lot of men who are weak, can not take decision. So why do people always think that women are weak? Women are also very strong. In the developing countries, women assume multiple roles. How should a woman be able to emancipate herself? I can speak for myself. I have to break my own glass ceiling, because nobody will do it for me. But when you break that glass ceiling you have to be aware that you might get splinters. And it is not always easy to do. You can have problems.

Q. What is your message to BASUG ?

Leila- I think BASUG is making the right choices involving Bangladesh communities in the development of their country. You are here migrant like me, you are doing lot of jobs. Sometimes you might think- does it make any difference. But I tell you one thing - *all big things are not always the ideal ones; small things when done properly and successful can make a lot of difference.* The most important thing is to have a purpose. What do you like to change: If that is clear to the members I think you will have a strong organisation. As Antonie de Saint-Exupery, author of the "*Little Prince*" said, "*if you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.*" They are doing this because they want to reach somewhere. It is the dream for example, in my case that keeps me going. If I don't have dream or a purpose in life, I don't see any meaning of my own existence. Women must have a purpose, on what they would like to do with their lives. It is not easy though to fulfil the dreams for as long as women suffer inequality and the social barriers which hinder their development remain in place.
