

South East Asia

Lilibeth, The Philippines

Lilibeth, 18, is from Saub, Matanao city in the southern part of the Philippines. Lilibeth is the eighth child of twelve children ranging in age from 8- to 27-years-old. Her parents are farmers who have completed only their first year of high school. Her father works in the rice fields.



Lilibeth, 18, Children's World Congress on Child Labor and Education, New Delhi, India, September 4-8, 2005

Education is not free in the Philippines. In 1996, Lilibeth dropped out of school when she was in the fifth grade. The public schools have miscellaneous fees, which her parents could not afford. Even so, they always encouraged Lilibeth to study so that she would not end up like them. They wanted her to have a brighter future. At age 9, Lilibeth started working on their neighbor's farm so that she could return to school, studying part-time, the next year and help support her family. For four years, Lilibeth worked nearly eight hours a day, four days a week, for a minimum wage of 60 Philippine Peso (US \$1.30) a day on that farm. She cut grass and planted corn, sugarcane, and root crops.

After working on the farm for a year, Lilibeth resumed school. That same year, her mother left the family after arguing with her father, and Lilibeth had to assume her mother's tasks. While her mother returned after ten months, by age 10, Lilibeth was already preparing food for her younger brother and sister. She often missed school because of work. At times, she was in school almost nine hours a day, two or three days a week. She completed elementary school in 2000.

In 2001, when she was 14 years old, Lilibeth went to Davao city to work as a child domestic worker. She had no *formal* training for this job. The chores she had learned at home in her province were different from those she was expected to do in the city. Lilibeth worked for a friend of her cousin, who works in the same village and recommended Lilibeth. There were six people, including four children, in the family for whom Lilibeth worked.

Lilibeth had thought that she would work as a household helper in Davao city. However, she ended up also working in her employer's eatery (a small restaurant) and semi-bar establishment. Lilibeth worked irregular hours, usually from 3 a.m. until 11 p.m., six days a week for nearly three years. She bought groceries for the day, cooked, served food to the guests, washed kitchen utensils, and cleaned the eatery. In the semi-bar establishment, Lilibeth served alcoholic drinks, entertained customers, and served *pulután* (usually finger food, like peanuts and spicy food, served to complement alcoholic drinks). As a domestic worker, Lilibeth did household chores at home. She cooked, washed and ironed

clothes, cleaned the house, fed the baby and her employer's dog, washed the car, and did other chores.

It was difficult for Lilibeth to get permission to go out. She was only allowed outside for specific reasons, like going to the market, or visiting the hospital if there was a family emergency. She was strictly forbidden from going out to meet her friends.

Lilibeth made 1,000 Philippine Peso (US \$18) a month. This was usually just enough for *her* to pay her tuition fee for school. Despite working, Lilibeth continued her studies by attending "special" classes at Assumption College of Davao, a private Catholic school in Davao City, on Sundays from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. ... almost 12 hours in one day! Any money that she was able to *save*, Lilibeth used for emergencies, like when her family needed help.

Lilibeth worked with three other girls, who were close to her age. In spite of carrying out many chores, Lilibeth still liked her boss for treating the girls with respect. "I was always treated *almost* like a family member," she said. She stayed in her own quarters in her employer's house. However, Lilibeth only got to go home once or twice a year.

The only time she "played" was during physical-education and music class on Sundays. Often, she had head aches and body pain. She had no paid time off. Therefore, sometimes she worked even when she was sick. When she was sick, she did not even go to the doctor.

Lilibeth's school partners with the Visayan Forum, a non-government organization that works for the interests of marginalized migrants who work in the invisible sectors, like domestic workers and trafficked women and children. Lilibeth was invited by the Visayan Forum through her school to participate in their programs and become a member of the Association of Domestic Workers in the Philippines (SUMAPI). Lilibeth participated in their activities, such as team-building workshops, and she was eventually elected President of the SUMAPI Davao chapter. Since then, she has helped in the implementation of SUMAPI's plans and activities. They disseminate information to child laborers, particularly, about their rights and the importance of education.

With Visayan Forum's help, Lilibeth was able to stop doing domestic work at age 17. Visayan Forum invited her to *volunteer* in return for supporting her education and providing her with an allowance to meet her daily needs, including her food and school uniform. Lilibeth did not hesitate to accept the opportunity and to leave work. During the week, Lilibeth volunteers at the Visayan Forum. She assists in training, organizing and advocating against child domestic labor, particularly in the southern part of Philippines. She got involved in stopping child labor because she knows first-hand how difficult it is to be a child laborer and that there are still child laborers.

When she was working, Lilibeth was unaware of worker's rights. She had no knowledge of written employment contracts between homeowners and household help that made expectations clear at the beginning of the hiring process.

Lilibeth has been living with staff from the Visayan Forum (VF) in the VF shelter office in Davao City since May 2004. Before leaving her job, Lilibeth had no free time. Now, she has time to enjoy life, improve herself, and help other child laborers.

Lilibeth still attends classes at Assumption College of Davao every Sunday for 12 hours. However, now, she receives support for her education from the Visayan Forum. She is now a senior in high school. She is determined to finish high school in a few months. Lilibeth sees education as the stepping-stone to broadening people's horizons. Studying has enabled her to gain not only friends, but also knowledge and enhanced awareness of societal issues. Learning has increased her self-esteem and confidence. Not only has it met her basic needs, but it has filled her emotional, spiritual, and mental needs. Education has given her hope.

Lilibeth aspires to pursue a career in helping children who are in caught in critical situations around the world. She dreams of getting a degree from a good university and becoming a public servant. She believes that she can achieve her dream, but she is still struggling. Only lack of opportunity or an unexpected emergency might hinder her, she said. Do you think the "opportunity" to attend "special" classes *one* day a week is the best preparation for children to get into a good university? Despite working seven years of her life, Lilibeth thinks that things have worked out for her good.

It is difficult for Lilibeth to consider the costs, or what might have been, had *the government* ensured free and quality full-time formal education for her. Lilibeth thinks that children should be learning in school instead of working. Child labor should be totally eliminated. Yet, she rationalizes that her working was okay because otherwise *she* would have been unable to pay for her education. She believes that she had no choice but to work, since she wanted to learn and her parents were unable to support her education. However, she holds the government responsible for this. "The government did not implement their programs, plans, and projects well," she said.

Lilibeth is very independent. She has learned some lessons from making mistakes, and now makes wiser decisions for herself. Sometimes, she wonders why she had to work when she should have been in school, even given her family's economic problem. What could have been if *the government* had ensured free and quality education for her? Lilibeth could have concentrated on her schooling and had time to enjoy her childhood, instead of working, she said. Lilibeth had to give up full-time school to attend part-time school. As a result, she feels that her knowledge is insufficient and she had no time for self-improvement. Should children have no choice but to worry about their futures and what will happen to them if they do not work, while they are working - as Lilibeth did?

Lilibeth believes that the best way to help child laborers is to make both children and parents aware of the disadvantages of child labor, and to empower children. Importantly, all institutions and groups concerned (e.g., NGOs, government agencies, etc.) should work together to prevent children from entering the work force and to rescue children from child labor. The government should provide free and quality education for all

children. There should be strict implementation of formulated laws against child labor, including punishments and consequences for the perpetrators of child labor. It is very important for children to have *access* to meaningful education, and to be protected against child labor. Only children learning and playing in their childhood will generate a more fruitful, progressive and peaceful adult population, economy and world.