

EY2010 Journalist Award Netherlands

Winner print/online

Elsbeth Stoker

Article title: "Nooit alleen, want Allah en Jezus leiden ons" ("Never alone, because Allah and Jesus are guiding us")

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Elsbeth Stoker (30) started as a reporter at the Volkskrant in 2005. This daily newspaper is one of the largest and most successful quality newspapers in the Netherlands. She writes mainly about the labour market and social affairs. In 2010 she wrote a series of articles about the working poor. The article 'Never alone, because Jesus and Allah lead us the way' was one of them.

Translation

Never alone, because Allah and Jesus are guiding us

In recent months we have heard the stories of the working poor in the Volkskrant. Today the conclusion: illegal workers

These are the only 8 square metres in the Netherlands where Saïd, a Ghanaian, feels safe. He lives in one of the many flats built in the seventies in Amsterdam's Bijlmer quarter. In this neighbourhood, the 45-year-old illegal worker doesn't have to be on his guard: it is his room, and he rents it from an African family for 200 euro per month.

In this small space, crowded with his possessions -- for the most part donated -- is everything Saïd owns. There is clothing piled in the corner, a cabinet with a CD player on it. Next to it is a copy of the Qur'an and CDs by Marco Borsato and Jan Smit, Saïd's favourite Dutch artists and his language 'teachers'.

Between the bed and the wall a colourful, thickly-woven rug is rolled up. Saïd unrolls it every day and kneels, with his head bowed in the direction of his old fridge, that is, facing east.

*God, guide me
You know my mission
Guide me wherever I go
Watch over me,
in all that I do
Protect me from evil
Wherever I go today. God help me*

are the words heard several times a day in his room. Because it is thanks to Allah that he hasn't been caught and that he has found employment on the fringe of the Dutch labour market. To make ends meet as well as to send money to support his family in Ghana, Saïd does house cleaning for private individuals. He isn't the only African, Asian or Eastern European who tries to earn his living as an illegal 'domestic worker'. Estimates vary from thousands to ten thousands. But no one knows for sure.

It is also unclear to what extent they earn a decent salary and what their working conditions are like. Horror stories abound. Illegal workers who earn 5 euro or even less per hour. Employers who say to them: 'If you don't want to accept this wage, I will phone the police and you will be deported.' Or even worse, usually in the case of women: 'Clean the house and then go to bed with me, or you can forget it.'

Saïd, whose name has been changed, considers himself fortunate. Okay, he admits. During his first three years in the Netherlands he sold handbags at the market and earned around 10 euros a day. He barely had money for rent and food. Aside from working, his days consisted of hanging out in his small room.

He has already been working for seven years as a cleaner, thanks to connections. And he didn't even have to buy 'his addresses' from other illegal workers. The going price for some addresses is 200 euros', he explains. Saïd has five clients whose houses he

cleans for a total of 16 hours per week. His monthly income amounts to approximately 650 euros. After he deducts his rent, he has 450 euros left for food, savings and money to send to his family. 'Or I send mobile phones', he tells me. 'People in Ghana think that we are better off than they are. Over the years I have already mailed them four mobiles: for my mother, my brother and my two sisters.'

23 years away from home

'I think that this interview is a gift from Jesus to me', says Lorie May-Os (51). She stands in her tiny kitchen, somewhere in a street of tidy row houses in Bussum. Several kilometres away from Saïd's room. The smell of the deep-fryer permeates her living space. Photographs of children fill her living room. Four are her own—she has scarcely seen them in the past 23 years. Two of them have died during that time. Then there are the pictures of 'her twelve other children', those whom Lorie has looked after over the years.

Like Saïd, Lorie has no papers. But unlike many others in her situation, she is willing to tell her story. 'Just imagine: an illegal Filipina who becomes famous in the Netherlands', says the diminutive Asian woman as she prepares spring rolls for her guest. As far as Lorie is concerned, the story of domestic workers is one that must be told. 'How else will we get a work permit?'

Lorie's journey, as she herself calls it, began on Christmas Eve, 1987. That evening she flew to Singapore, because she had to report to the family where she had been hired as housekeeper on 25 December. The reason she left her own family behind, although her youngest son was only ten months old? A debt of 100 thousand pesos. Earlier that year her eldest son had died of bone cancer. In the Philippines, her husband's salary, combined with hers, was insufficient to pay the hospital bills. Initially, Lorie thought her time away would be just half a year. 'I thought that I would have earned enough to pay off everything.' But when she returned to Baguio City in the summer of 1988, it turned out that the debt was even bigger. 'My husband wasn't very good with money, and then there was the interest too', she explains, as she sets a large platter of spring rolls on the table.

In no time Lorie left again for Singapore. After three years she went to Hong Kong. In the meantime, her three remaining children were being reared by her sister. 'My youngest son calls her Mama.'

In 2000 she met a Dutch ex-pat family in Hong Kong and two years later they approached her with a request: 'Our children are so attached to you; will you return to the Netherlands with us?' It was a tough decision. In contrast to Singapore and Hong Kong, she can't get a work permit for her housekeeping job (see inset). This means that she is an illegal worker: her employer risks being fined 4,000 euro and Lorie lives in constant fear of getting caught. In addition, her status means that she won't see her own family for years. Going on holiday to the Philippines every year hasn't been possible since 2002. There is always the question whether Dutch customs will fall for the tourist visa trick again when she returns. In spite of all these obstacles, she said 'yes'. 'Sometimes I say to myself: come on Lorie, they are not your own children. But I love them so much and my employer treats me with respect.'

On top of that, she is committed to fulfilling her role as mother: earning enough money to send her children to university. To finance this goal, she works about 57 hours per week.

Besides working for her expat family, she also does house cleaning for private clients. In a good month, she earns 2,000 euros. At the end of 2011 her youngest son will graduate and she can go home. 'I am saving to open my own shop.'

For some years Lorie has had a second goal: to improve the position of illegal cleaners. The incident that gave rise to this decision was the death of her second son, Louie, in 2005. The 23-year-old student was stabbed to death in a fight with other students.

'Because I don't have papers, I couldn't go home. I couldn't attend his funeral', Lorie says. The risk of not being able to return was too great. It makes her furious that someone who has a job, no criminal record and is just trying to earn money for her family should have no freedom of movement in the Netherlands. Ever since, Lorie has been active in human rights organisations such as Respect Nederland and Trusted Migrants and she has become a member of FNV Bondgenoten. 'I can pour all my pain and sorrow into this cause. We illegal cleaners want a permit. There is enough work for us. We want to pay taxes; we want health care insurance and a collective agreement to fall back on.'

A greener country

'It actually didn't matter to me which country I emigrated to', says Saïd. He has left his room in the Bijlmer and is now standing, chamois in hand, in a spacious living room elsewhere in the city. It is the home of one of his clients, where he works for a few hours each week. He takes turns cleaning the huge windows which look out over the water.

When he flew into the Netherlands in August 2000, he didn't actually know anything about the country. Just that it could be cold, that the people were friendly and that life in Europe was better. Some of his relatives were already living there.

Why did he leave home? 'As the eldest son, it is your responsibility to take care of your parents when they grow old' he says, as he closes the windows and wipes water drops from the floor. And his sales job in Accra wasn't going to make that possible. 'In Ghana, they look down on you in that case. If you are a man and cannot take care of your parents, you aren't good for anything.'

Every time he transfers money to them — about 50-100 euro per month — he is happy. 'I have the feeling that I am making a contribution. But occasionally I say 'no'. Not only my family, but also my friends and acquaintances ask for money. They don't like to hear that, but I am not God. It really isn't always that easy to earn money here.'

One day, on a date as yet undetermined, he is going to go home. 'Hopefully before my mother dies, in any case.'

Allah is the one who maps out his life, Saïd says. And that thought comforts him at times when he is fed up. 'For it is God who has taken such good care of me over these past years', he says as a Muslim. He is constantly aware of the fact that he could be unmasked as an illegal worker and sent back to his home country. Not to tempt fate, he does his utmost to avoid all contact with the police. Running a red light? For Saïd that is not an option. Ending up in an accident? That is one of his greatest fears.

'It is dreadful to constantly be on guard. I wish I could feel free for once, like other normal

people.' It can happen before you know it, he acknowledges. 'Someone I know had to use the facilities during the Kwakoe Festival. So he walked over to the bushes. But before he knew it, he was fined for urinating in public and the police discovered that he had no papers. We haven't seen him since.'

Jesus

'The first two years were the most difficult', Lorie says. 'I missed my children so much.' After that, it was easier, thanks to Jesus. 'I woke up one night in Singapore in 1989 and felt a sharp pain. I was so anxious, that I prayed: please don't let me die in this strange country. If I have to die, let me die at home.'

'Then I felt as if a hand touched my chest and took the pressure away. I believe that that was Jesus.' Later she was diagnosed with gall bladder problems. But that doesn't change her faith. 'When Jesus is with me, even when I can't see him, I am not alone and I can continue on this journey and deal with the guilt.'

It wasn't only homesickness, but also a sense of guilt that troubled Lorie. 'My children would sometimes be on the phone and say: 'Mama, why did you leave us? You don't love us.' But two years ago she had a good talk with them. 'They know that I am doing this to give them a better future.'

Now that her journey is coming to an end, she is thinking about what life will be like after her return to the Philippines. She already sees herself lying in a hammock in her father's shady garden. 'I am going to live with my father at first.' Will she ever go back to her husband? 'I am not sure I still have a marriage.' But, a few minutes later she laughs out loud and says, 'Who knows, maybe I will fall in love again.'

Trade union for illegal cleaners

Since 2009, the FNV Bongenoten union has been trying to organise cleaners who work illegally. Just because you don't have a collective labour agreement, health care or a pension plan doesn't mean that you have no rights, according to Ellen Dekkers of FNV Bongenoten. 'People have a definite right to essential health care. We also point out to them that there is a minimum wage.'

As far as Dekkers is concerned, a discussion on the position of illegal workers should be launched in the Netherlands. 'Imagine that you are sexually assaulted or subjected to some other form of abuse. In Switzerland, you can lodge a complaint as an illegal worker without fearing the consequences. In the Netherlands you run the risk of being deported.'

In addition, FNV Bongenoten wants domestic help to be recognized as a 'real job'. These 'odd jobs' are not regarded as such in the Netherlands. 'Only when it is seen as real employment can we open the discussion about granting domestic workers a work permit.' In the meantime, the FNV has two hundred illegal workers who are members, one of whom is Lorie. For her efforts, Lorie received the Clara Wichmann medal in 2009.

Lorie May-Os from the Philippines works as illegal cleaner in the Netherlands to pay hospital bills for her late son.

The national winner was selected by a national jury which consisted of:

- Jan Vranken, Journalist
- Cok Vrooman, Journalist
- Yo Bothmer, EC Representation