

FOREWORD

The issue of migrant domestic worker abuse is becoming a growing concern in Singapore and around the world. The vulnerability of the migrant domestic worker's position as a resident in the home of her employer, the lack of labour legislation to protect her combine to create a situation in which abuse is likely to occur. In addition, the negative perceptions of migrant domestic workers held by society in general, implicitly condone the abuse of migrant domestic workers. These attitudes as revealed through press forum and opinion blogs on the internet include:

"Maids" take advantage of employers by running away at the first opportunity

The employer is a victim to the untrustworthiness of domestic workers. The underlying assumption feeding this attitude is that domestic workers are lazy and don't want to work, and therefore run away at the first chance they get.

"Maids" have lots of boyfriends and 'steal husbands'

Employers and agents use these assumptions about their domestic worker's promiscuity to justify confinement of the domestic worker to the home and concur that "husband snatching" is one of the dangers of having maids. Hence, they need to be closely supervised even with CCTV camera surveillance.

Since its inception in 2004, H.O.M.E. has been housing men and women migrant workers in our shelters. Since then we have assisted some 3,000 workers, of which 70% are migrant domestic workers. Besides providing shelters to these men and women who are mostly state witnesses for prosecution against errant employers and agents, H.O.M.E. provides advocacy, welfare and empowerment programs and services for our beneficiaries.

A research survey of the 219 out of 300 residents housed by H.O.M.E. shelters during a period of ten months from October 2007 to August 2008, provides empirical findings for our recommended policy and law changes to the State in the protection of migrant domestic workers against abuse and exploitation in Singapore.

1. We maintain that standard contracts and existing legal protection are inadequate in the protection of the rights of domestic workers. We call for the recognition of migrant domestic workers as workers and should be protected under the Employment Act of Singapore.
2. We call for the State's compliance to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in the existing discriminatory immigration and manpower policies that allow for a woman migrant worker to be terminated as a result of pregnancy and

the restrictive marriage regulations. We also recommend that HIV Testing should be made only with the consent of the patient and where patient post counselling is provided.

3. We will continue to have a program of public education on the rights of migrant domestic workers through, media, publications, opinion blogs and school talks.

We acknowledge with thanks to Professor Kayoko Ueno and her team for assisting us in developing the survey questionnaire, providing the training of interviewers, supervising the conduct of interviews and analysing the data collected.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Interviews were conducted on the residents of a H.O.M.E. shelter during the period from 20 October 2007 to 14 August 2008 with two pre-surveys. Out of approx. 300 residents during the period, we collected valid data from 219 respondents. Most interviews were conducted one-on-one in English. Due to language constraints, however, some interviews were conducted with a translation by another H.O.M.E. resident. For instance, in the case of an Indian respondent whose level of English hampered smooth communication, we asked another resident from India with higher English proficiency to translate the questions and answers. Interviews lasted between 10 to 20 minutes. Before the commencement of each interview, there was the use of a small talk to ensure that the respondent was relaxed enough to be able to answer without hesitation and as honestly as possible. It was also made clear to the respondent that she was not required to answer any question which she found uncomfortable.

2. PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Country of Origin

The respondents were from 5 countries, namely, the Philippines (64%), Indonesia (28%), India (7%), Myanmar (3%), and Sri Lanka (1%). These are among the countries the Singapore government designates as permitted sources of foreign domestic workers.

Age

The youngest respondent was 18 years of age and the oldest was 45. The average age of the respondents was 29.

Religion

The respondents came with different religious background. As many of the respondents were from the Philippines, 68% of them were Christian (including Roman Catholic), and 22% were Muslim, coming mostly from Indonesia. 2% embraced Hinduism and 7% were Buddhist. The rest of 2 women practiced Sikh and Jehovah's Witness respectively. There was no known free thinker.

Education

The average length of years of formal education the respondents had was 11 years. Among the respondents from the Philippines and Indonesia who constitute the vast majority, the educational attainment of Filipinas was higher than that of Indonesians. 54% of Filipinas were either from college or university whereas 61% and 31% of Indonesians were from junior high school and senior high school respectively.

Marital Status

While 58% of all the respondents were single, 40% of Filipinas and 31% of Indonesians were married. 68% of Filipinas (married or otherwise) had at least one child compared to 29% of Indonesians.

Previous Working Experience

Before coming to Singapore, the majority (69%) had engaged in other types of work apart from domestic work in their own countries. Filipinas were slightly more likely to have experienced other types of work than Indonesians (75% and 62% respectively).

As for previous working experiences abroad, one fifth of the respondents (24%) had worked abroad besides Singapore, such as Middle-East, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia. No difference was shown in the proportion between Filipinas and Indonesians.

Reasons for Working in Singapore

When asked as to the reasons for working as a domestic worker, the majority of the respondents answered 'money for my family back home' and 'money for my future' (74% and 73% respectively). Notably, 21% of Indonesian respondents were working due to 'family violence at home' while in the case of Filipinas such reason was not common (2%). Around the half of the respondents (42%) claimed that they started working as domestic workers to gain 'experience in another country'.

Employers

The average duration which the respondents had worked for the last employer was about 14 months. Although the number of employers they had worked for in Singapore before coming to the shelter varied from one to 9 employers, most of them had worked only for one (49%) or two (32%)

employers. With regard to the employment immediately before coming to the shelter, almost all respondents found their employers with the involvement of recruitment agencies. Only 4% of Indonesians and 8% of Filipinas were hired directly without the involvement of any recruitment agency. For the costs of their journeys to Singapore (including airfares, health screening, visa and agency fees, if any), the respondents were charged the average of S\$2,146 (Singapore dollars) which they were required to pay back by way of letting their employers deduct their salaries.

In the context of Singapore being a multi racial country, more than the half of the respondents (66%) worked for Chinese families followed by Indian families (14%). Others worked for families of Malays or expatriate, etc. The employers of most respondents lived in flats developed by the Singapore government, known as HDB flats (51%) or private condominiums (27%) with the rest in landed properties. 67% of the employer's families were nuclear families, and 17% were extended families, with the mean number of children being 2 per family.

Working Condition in Regard to Last Employer

Daily routine as a domestic helper included chores such as cleaning the house and car, cooking, washing and ironing clothes, and taking care of children. Such chores included, in some cases, painting walls in the house, helping the employers with errands relating to their business, to mention a few.

Out of 219 respondents, only 7 worked 8 hours or less a day. Working hours of 16 to 19 hours were most common (67%), and no difference was found between Filipinas and Indonesians. Notably, 68% did not have any day off whereas 21% were allowed one day off a month. Only 7% had a day off every week. Indonesians were less likely to have days off.

An interesting piece of finding was that 50% of the respondents were required to work at another place in addition to their employers' home notwithstanding that it is illegal in Singapore. These included homes of their employers' relatives and friends, and their employers' shops, restaurant and offices. 80% of the respondents having worked at more than one place didn't receive any payment for the extra work. Indonesians were required to work at more than one place more often than Filipinas (58% and 48% respectively).

Nearly the half of respondents did not have their own rooms to sleep. More specifically, 52% slept in their own rooms, 27% shared a room with other family member(s), most often with children. The rest was not provided with a room to sleep. They had to sleep in study, storage, dining or

corridor areas or employers' work place.

In response to the question as to whether they had adequate time for rest, 54% responded negatively. Indonesians were more likely (albeit slightly) not to have adequate rest. 64% of the respondents were not allowed to own mobile phones, and there was no difference in this treatment between Filipinas and Indonesians.

The salary difference between Filipinas and Indonesians was significant, Filipinas being higher than Indonesians with the average monthly wages of S\$360 and S\$308 (Singapore dollars) respectively.

3. PROBLEMS FACED BY RESPONDENTS

Many of the respondents resorted to coming to the shelter due to abuse from their employers or recruiting agencies (the latter was the case when the respondents were sent back by their employers or they left the employers' household and were waiting for transfer). Abuse took form of physical, sexual, psychological, verbal abuse and neglect for the respondents. 56% alleged to have been subjected to verbal abuse in one form or another by their employers' family members (including children). 18% experienced neglect by employers such as not being given enough food or medicine, or any rest after a long day of work. Among 20% of the respondents who alleged to have been physically abused, there were accounts of extreme physical abuse such as having been hit with an object or spat on, forced to walk a long distance, splashed with cold water, pushed off the stairs, as well as cases of sexual abuse.

Likewise, problems arose between the respondent and the agencies. The majority of them experienced verbal abuse by the agents (23%), and there were cases of physical and sexual abuse by the agents as well. On physical abuse, one respondent was forced to stand for 80 minutes, and another was hit by her agent leaving a hand mark on her face. An overwhelming number of respondents felt that they had been abused by their agents in one way or another.

Most of the respondents who had to work at a place other than their employers' home, were aware that it was in violation of laws of Singapore. Many continued to work at multiple places for the fear of the employers sending them home. Not insignificant number of the respondents had monetary issues with their employers concerning "late payment of salary" (26%) 'no payment of salary' (20%), "withholding savings" (19%), "salary deductions as penalty" (15%), and "repatriation costs" (15%) which were supposed to be paid by their employers.

Also, they were asked questions relating to recurring problems with their employers' family members, which had previously been detected through pre-surveys. They replied to each question in a "yes/no" style. The majority had a problem with 'overwork' (63%). The half of the respondents suffered from "insufficient sleep/rest" (50%) and 'illegal deployment' (47%). Around one third of the respondents felt they were 'not allowed to communicate with their family and friends' (39%) and 'employer's threat to repatriate her' (32%). One fourth complained about 'insufficient (amount of) food' (29%), and 'no attention to her health/medical problem' (26%)

It was found that these problems often did not start from their employers and agencies in Singapore but before their arrival in Singapore. 17% of the respondents alleged various forms of maltreatment and problems in their agencies or training centers in their own countries. For example, home country's agents and Singapore agents differed in their explanations of working conditions. Indonesians were likely to face the problems probably as they needed to rely on the home country's recruiters and training centres to gain an entry to Singapore largely due to the lack of network and resources as well as communication barrier.

With regard to the employment contracts between domestic workers and their employers, it was found that the practice was for their agents to procure the signing by both parties. On the question 'signing contract without explanations given or no contract', 39% of the respondents replied in affirmative, and out of the Indonesian respondents, 55% of them replied in affirmative.

Before coming to Singapore, 60% of the respondents received some level of training in their home countries. More specifically, 91% of Indonesians received training as opposed to 47% of Filipina respondents. Almost all of Indonesians entered Singapore through training centres where they were taught about general housework (96%), English language (98%), taking care of the elderly/sick (82%), taking care of the baby (84%), and their rights as domestic workers (50%).

When asked as to how they first came to know of H.O.M.E. or its shelters, In the case of 47% of the respondents, it was "through a friend or relative working in Singapore", and 32% was "through the Ministry of Manpower". A small number learnt the existence of the shelters through articles published on the newspapers or in the magazines (5%), the police (4%), the embassy (4%) or locals (2%). 43% came to the shelter on their own initiative, and 25% were referred to by the Ministry of Manpower. Besides H.O.M.E., 42% sought advice from their friends or relatives where 28% also sought advice from the Ministry of Manpower on the problems they encountered.

Although it was case-dependent, a good number of respondents have been in the shelter for more

than a month, a few close to a year. After their case is declared as over, 44% wanted to return to their home countries, while 37% wanted to continue work in Singapore.

While working abroad, including Singapore, as a domestic worker, although 24% were able to save some money, 56% didn't save any, and 20% still had some sort of loan.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is fair to say that working and life conditions of migrant domestic workers shown in this survey do not represent the actual conditions of many other migrant domestic workers in Singapore. On the other hand, our survey was able to show various types of ill-treatments and exploitation which foreign domestic workers were prone to and as such, the cases we saw in the survey were not isolated ones. They were faced with long working hours, insufficient rest, illegal deployment, abuse and non-payment issues. Restrictions placed on migrant domestic workers were multi-faceted, from the inability to communicate with their friends and family members, to their food intake. We found that having no off days and the inability to possess mobile phones prevented domestic workers from building their own social network and reaching out to each other.

In our view, these problems are not merely attributed to the conduct of some malicious employers. For one, domestic workers are different from other types of workers since many of them perform work alone in the insular environments of the employer's home. The relationship between the domestic workers and their employers tend to be characterized as personal rather than occupational, hence there is difficulty in implementing the legislation of certain basic rights such as maximum working hours and rest days to protect the domestic workers. Also, the plentiful supply of domestic workers available at a relatively cheap cost in Singapore does not help boosting their standing or perceived power in society.

We hope to continue to carry out more studies in greater detail on the problems domestic workers are facing in Asia and how each country responded to the problems so as to bring about legislative changes where desirable. We believe that this will better serve society's interest at large.

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