



Transient Workers Count Too
DIGNITY OVERDUE

NEWSLETTER

WEEKLY
DAY OFF
FOR ALL

Volume 11

Number 2

March-April 2016

Happy Returns?

Life After Being a Migrant Worker

This issue of the newsletter focuses on the places from which migrant workers travel abroad to take employment. The articles are not about how they contribute to national economies, but life at community and village level: What difference do migrant workers' earnings abroad make to their families and to the workers themselves when they go back to the places where they grew up? What are their experiences of return? How do others think about their absence and their return?

In money terms, outcomes can vary a lot. Workers who manage to pay for family members' educations, buy land, find the marriage partner they'd hoped for or start a business of their own may count their experience as migrant workers as having been successful. Those who return home with a burden of debt around their necks and their families in much the same situation as they were when they left can hardly be faulted for feeling bitter or depressed about it.

Much is beyond workers' control: whether they find a good employer, how long they work in the same place, and the wider environment in their home area, where money can easily be swallowed up with little to show for it, particularly if there are not the institutions, infrastructure and policies in place to provide a scaffolding within which migrants can build a better future for themselves and those dearest to them, starting even before they return.

But costs and benefits are not to be counted only in money. Workers leave behind people who miss them and the emotional support and encouragement they can provide. The very children for whom they work to provide them with better opportunities and a more prosperous life may suffer for their absence, and the workers themselves are aware of that; many struggle with trying to decide what to do for the best, but are forced to decide that their families cannot afford for them to stop working abroad any time soon.

In Singapore, there's not much we can do to influence conditions in workers' home countries, and normally, when workers go home, that's the end of our ties with them. What we in Singapore can do is to help to maximize the benefits for migrant workers of coming here: we can fight to cut the costs of obtaining a job, ensure that workers receive the pay they have been promised and stay fit and healthy – and those are just the basics. We can do better with national policies favouring integration, multiple rather than single contract terms of employment, opportunities to raise skills levels and undertake classes that will be of value in the future and flexibility in employment so that there are chances for workers to move on to jobs with improved pay and conditions when they find themselves with a bad employer. No-one should return to their countries of origin feeling ill-treated, cheated or that they have spent what should have been their most productive years in fruitless toil.

They deserve better.

Next Heartbeat

The next Heartbeat, our get-together for people interested in volunteering with TWC2, is at the TWC2 Dayspace in Little India on Wednesday 11th May, at 7.30pm. If you're interested in coming along, please register with TWC2's Administration Officer at info@twc2.org.sg

Next Outreach

TWC2's next outreach session (aimed at publicising the services we can provide to migrant workers) will be a big one. It is on Sunday, 15th May. If you'd like to help, please contact the Administration Officer at info@twc2.org.sg, giving your email the header "Would like to help with outreach".

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Events

February 23rd: Trainee law students from the San Beda Legal Aid Bureau in Manila came to TWC2's Day Space where they met TWC2 volunteers who spoke about the work TWC2 does and the problems that migrant workers face in Singapore. Some were not aware of the protections that exist in Singapore law. TWC2 volunteers explained that the problem workers often face is that they are not in a position, because of insecure status in Singapore or lack of money, to make use of the rights and protections that officially exist.

March 6th: The Indonesian Family Network celebrated its 10th anniversary at Sekolah Indonesia. That afternoon, the hall of the school filled with domestic workers, who watched performances of dancing and singing as well as the presentation of certificates to mark the graduation of women from the past year's classes, held on Sundays when those workers who have days off can attend them. Many, perhaps most, of the women present had themselves taken one course or another. IFN President Ummairah welcomed the workers and IFN's guests and thanked those who taught classes.

One of the guests was TWC2 President, Dr Noorashikin Abdul Rahman. She recalled how IFN was founded in 2006 and congratulated the network on its achievements.

In a post on TWC2's Facebook page, Noorashikin wrote:

"TWC2 is proud to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the Indonesian Family Network. The group has come a long way from the early days back in 2006 when TWC2 together with Indonesian NGOs such as Kapal Perempuan and Migrant Care came together to train a group of Indonesian domestic workers to take on leadership roles and help other fellow domestic workers. Today, IFN is standing tall and strong and making waves in empowering fellow domestic workers with skills, knowledge and advocating for rights and fair treatment of domestic workers. Soldier on IFN! We will always be your partner and support to champion for domestic workers' rights!"

March 7th-11th: TWC2 hosted about 150 Temasek Junior College students at day schools from Monday to Thursday, followed by a smaller group from Ahmad Ibrahim School on Friday. There was no way that all the Temasek JC's students could have been squeezed into the Dayspace for a session and so four sessions over successive afternoons were arranged.

TWC2 day schools can provide students and interested public groups with a good introduction to the situation of migrant workers in Singapore. Presentations and contents are adapted to the interests and needs of those who request that TWC2 arranges them.

April 24th: TWC2 held its Annual General Meeting. In her address, TWC2 President, Dr Noorashikin Abdul Rahman, thanked the volunteers who enable TWC2 to achieve far more than its finances and relatively small staff on their own would allow. She thanked the society's staff and expressed her appreciation of the cooperation between the Indonesian Family Network and the Filipino Family Network and TWC2.

Before outlining highlights of the society's activity in 2015, Noorashikin spoke briefly about the importance of renewal: finding people who are willing to step forward and take on the running of the organization and handle its practical work as moves "into its teenage years". She added that, "Our aim is to disappear because we're no longer needed, but it looks as if we'll be needed for a while yet."

The committee's report provided a far from exhaustive outline of the society's direct services, public engagement, research and advocacy activities last year. Among other points, it noted that 719 cases were handled by the society's social workers, who also responded to 256 calls on the helpline or other contacts that required their assistance, short of becoming formal cases.

Our website went from strength to strength: one article, "Acting on tip-off, TWC2 rescues a maid trapped over two years without a day off" had 94,500 views. Some 20 talks, several day schools and thirty smaller consultation meetings and interviews were provided as part of our public engagement. Two new research reports came out and TWC2 contributed to a third.

While the number of meals served at The Cuff Road Project fell compared to 2014, we substantially increased our medical assistance and emergency housing spending, and sheltered 23 domestic workers compared to 18 in 2014. One notable initiative was the opening of the society's Dayspace in Little India in August 2015, which, despite initial worries that it might be under-used, has ended up bustling with activity. Discover Singapore organized 11 outings for workers last year.

When the society's financial report was issued, Alex Au, Treasurer, said that TWC2 could take pride in the fact that over 90 per cent of our budget was spent on the provision of services to our migrant worker clients: our administrative and other costs were met from the remaining amount.

Documents from the AGM will shortly be posted on TWC2's website.

Home, but not Home Free

A job in Singapore means a chance for young Bangladeshi men to reinvent themselves, to start a new life, to change their destiny. These men who would otherwise be knocking around the village, helping out on the family plot or loafing with friends see themselves caught in a dead end situation where the rest of the world looks exciting and prosperous. Parents worry that their sons won't find a job in Bangladesh, and will fall in with bad friends. To get a job near home, the men need not only the education (which most have) and the money (the families can scrape that together from relatives and money-lenders), but also the connections (impossible for families from rural villages).

Singapore beckons: the land of laws, good governance and ever-increasing prosperity, where so many migrants have already made their mark and returned home to build the trophy home that everyone admires. They've greased all the right palms, earned all the right certificates, they're prepared to work however long and hard he needs to work to make their families proud. That's what all young men think before they come, IPA* letter in hand. But how does it turn out for them?

For many young Bangladeshi men, going home is not the homecoming they'd imagined. Admittedly, TWC2 deals with men who are not only at the low end of the salary scale, but are also still likely to be in debt due to recruitment fees at the time they lodge a salary or injury claim, or find themselves prematurely terminated. But we at TWC2 also see men who've returned again and some who eventually find good jobs.



A step on the way abroad: workers at a training centre in Bangladesh.

Aziz

Injuries take a huge toll on men working in construction. Aziz, for example, worked for a company that paints and restores exposed surfaces. Receiving an electric shock from the blaster he was using to clean a wall, he fell, fracturing two vertebrae of his spine. Several operations later he was fit to return home, and wait until his compensation was settled in a common law suit.

You can't tell from looking at him that he's suffered a back injury, so some people might think he's exaggerating the problem. His family expected that he'd receive a large amount for such a serious injury, but that would take another year and a half. His return with only an advance loan of \$8,000 from a law firm did not impress his parents or his wife. His wife's parents convinced her to leave him, taking with her their young son, born while he was recovering in Singapore. His own parents also accused him of squandering the money on frivolous pleasures while in Singapore, and/or keeping it hidden from them in a secret account.

Aziz came back to Singapore more than two years after the accident to collect the compensation of \$100,000. It's a huge amount, and should be enough to support the family even if they survive only on the interest. But Aziz now lives alone, estranged from

his parents and unable to regain the trust of his wife. He dreams of coming again to Singapore, even though he knows that his back injury will prevent him from doing the hard work demanded of work permit holders.

He spends his long days hoping for some escape from a dismal and tedious existence without the support and contact even of his closest relatives. He's reluctant to proceed with his plan to build rental flats near the town because this will expose his wealth. Starting a business there would confirm everyone's suspicions that he's hiding money, and will prompt those people to beg for loans or gifts of money to sort out their own situations. Showing generosity to friends and relatives would quickly deplete his funds, while keeping it secure will alienate those same people.

Lablu

Lablu's brother had raised the money for his recruitment fees and so distrusted Lablu when he returned injured and empty-handed. Lablu had suffered a serious head and back injury, and, like Aziz, went home before he received his injury compensation. This resulted in disputes within the family, but Lablu was nonetheless allowed to remain in the family home. The family had difficulty arranging his marriage because several families of the prospective brides heard of the injury and refused to offer their daughters. The young woman whose family did agree only learned of his injuries gradually after the marriage. She turned out to be a sweet, loving and supportive wife and bore him two children within the first three years of marriage.

Lablu used a large amount of his compensation money to build a mosque next to his house, which raised the stature of the family within the village and secured his position as a dutiful and successful son. Without the option of another job abroad or at home, Lablu earns a small amount by storing rice and dried pulses to be sold after harvest when prices rise. It allows him to make a profit and also to show generosity by offering to sell to the needy at a lower price.

Both these young men received over \$100,000 in injury compensation. Aziz lives in a less developed area and is plagued by the demands of his family and requests from others for money. He's afraid to go out at night fearing that he could be kidnapped or killed for money. Lablu's family was better placed to start. His brother had worked eight years in Malaysia and built an impressive home for the family. Lablu's future is secure as long as he can continue to earn a bit from stockpiling and the interest. Because the mosque serves the interest of the community, his family will be protected and respected.

I happen to know a number of men who were victims of major accidents because the lengthy medical treatment allowed me to get to know them well, and in several cases to visit them after their return to Bangladesh. These men received relatively large amounts of money which either bolstered their standing in society, or made them prey to demands for money from others, or to thieves and conmen. Those men who received a small amount in injury compensation, or a small amount as a result of salary claims are likely to use that money to pay for another job in Singapore. Returning home in debt increases the likelihood that they'll struggle and beg for enough money to make the attempt again.

Ahsan

Ahsan, for instance, is now in Singapore working at his fourth job. The first was a failure; in his second –when I got to know him– his boss cheated him of his salary by forging his signature on the salary slips. The MOM spent more than a year investigating the situation, resulting in a decision that he was owed \$5,000. This amount was less than he'd managed to make by working illegally during that time, so he had quite a bit when he went home.

His plan to start a fish and prawn business was well-executed and started out nicely. He knew to be wary of the community who were jealous of his new wealth, so placed men near the fish and prawn ponds at night for protection. He hadn't prepared for gangsters coming with sticks to break the bones of his workers, landing all in hospital. Ahsan couldn't continue and came again to Singapore.

His second and third jobs lasted only a short time, and the present job is now a success. He repairs air conditioners in a shopping mall, sleeping in the office rather than spend money to return to a dorm in the evenings. The work's safe and the job regular. He sends money home to meet his family's basic needs, but won't have much saved for a business or investment when he returns.

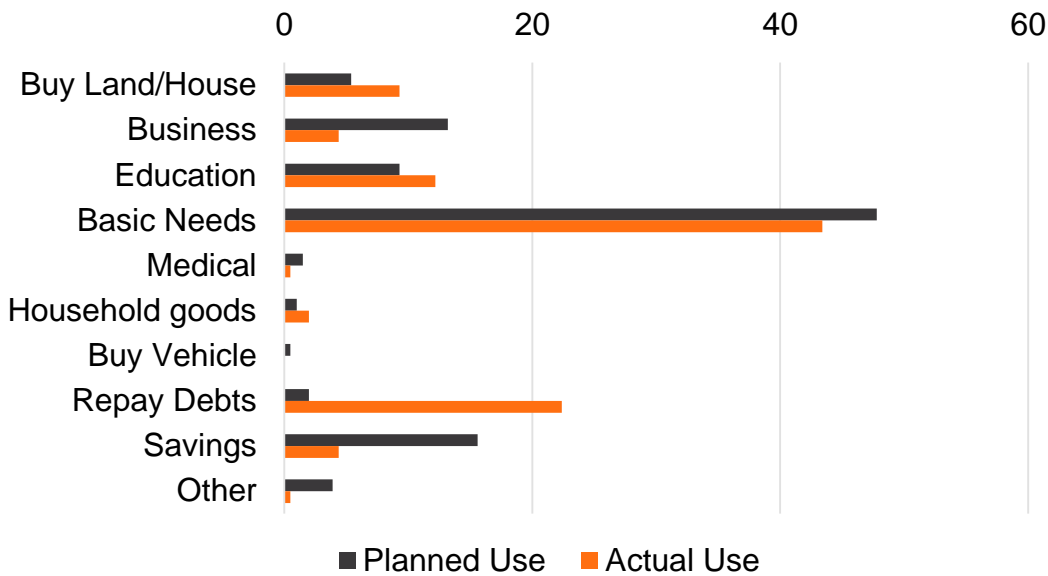
TCRP

Almost all of the men who attend the Cuff Road Project ask before they're sent home if they'll be able to return to work again in Singapore. Not only can we not guarantee this for any particular individual, we can't and won't assist in this process. It's not possible that all men will be permitted to return for new jobs, given the decreasing needs in Singapore's construction sector, and employers' preference for 'fresh' workers whose indebtedness makes them more compliant while enriching the employers.

Many who have regular paying jobs are able to use the money to build a trophy house for the village to admire. This secures their standing and prestige within the community, and makes it easier for a financial venture to succeed, but doesn't guarantee it. Studies show that almost 50% of the Bangladeshi men expect to put their Singapore-earned money towards basic needs, 16%

expect their earnings to go towards savings and 13% hope to put it towards a business. In fact most of the men use their salary money to meet basic needs, with 22% being used for repaying debts. Only 4% use the money for a business and another 4% for savings.**

Planned versus actual uses of remittances (n=205)



Bangladeshi workers pay about the same amount for their first job in Singapore (S\$10K-\$15K) as would-be migrants pay to people smugglers to arrange passage from Northern Africa to Europe (Euro 8,000). After the first attempt, men have contacts and skills certificates that allow them to avoid the initial high fees, and pay \$3,000-\$7,000 for subsequent jobs. People desperate enough to pay that much to leave home to find work or resettle in another country do so because they're unable to arrange an acceptable livelihood in their own country. Even knowing the extraordinary risks, they're determined to be among the lucky few that succeed. Staying home without decent paid work would label them unmotivated, cowardly and lazy. Going abroad means they're heroic, sophisticated and desirable. If the first time doesn't work out, maybe the next time will.

Debbie Fordyce

**IPA letter, the In-Principle Approval for the job approved by the Ministry of Manpower*

***MIGRATION AND PRECARIOUS WORK: BANGLADESHI CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN SINGAPORE, Asia Research Insititute 2014*

\$601 Billion: Value of International Migrants' Remittances in 2015

(Extracts from World Bank Press Release, 18th December, 2015)

The number of international migrants is expected to surpass 250 million this year, an all-time high, as people search for economic opportunity. And, fast growing developing countries have increasingly become a strong magnet for people from other parts of the developing world.

In a demonstration of their economic footprint, international migrants will send \$601 billion to their families in their home countries this year, with developing countries receiving \$441 billion, says the *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016*, produced by the World Bank Group's Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) initiative.

The United States was the largest remittance source country, with an estimated \$56 billion in outward flows in 2014, followed by Saudi Arabia (\$37 billion), and Russia (\$33 billion). India was the largest remittance receiving country, with an estimated \$72 billion in 2015, followed by China (\$64 billion), and the Philippines (\$30 billion).

"At more than three times the size of development aid, international migrants' remittances provide a lifeline for millions of households in developing countries. In addition, migrants hold more than \$500 billion in annual savings. Together, remittances and migrant savings offer a substantial source of financing for development projects that can improve lives and livelihoods in developing countries," said Dilip Ratha, co-author of the Factbook.

It finds that South-South migration is larger than South-North migration. Over 38 percent of the international migrants in 2013 migrated from developing countries to other developing countries, compared to 34 percent that moved from developing countries to advanced countries.

The top 10 migrant destination countries were the United States, Saudi Arabia, Germany, Russia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), United Kingdom, France, Canada, Spain and Australia. The top 10 migrant source countries were India, Mexico, Russia, China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and United Kingdom.

The Impact of Parents' Migration and Youth Aspirations in Ponorogo, Indonesia

Nisa's father works in Brunei as a construction worker. In between scaffolding the yet-formed shapes of buildings in Brunei, he has also spent years using his remittances to build Nisa's dreams of becoming a nurse. Nisa is one of many children in Ponorogo, Indonesia¹, who is able to afford higher education in a private vocational school because of her father's labour migration. As in Nisa's case, parents' remittances in Ponorogo are often directed towards financing higher education for their children – this is one of the key reasons why parents make the emotionally difficult decision to leave their young children behind to work overseas. A research project conducted by Asia Research Institute in 2013 (a collaborative effort with TWC2) attests that 'paying for family members' education' is one of the commonly-cited reasons for migration among our respondents². It is commonly hoped by parents that their children can undertake professional occupations (such as nursing) after graduation, which will consequently aid the entire family's socio-economic mobility.



Nisa in her home village

However, the route to upward social mobility may be a circuitous one, and may, in turn, lead migrants' children far from home. Nisa's private vocational school prepares their students to learn new languages on top of obtaining professional healthcare diplomas in order to ease their graduates through the school-to-work transition, where overseas skilled labour migration becomes a possible pathway forward. If children like Nisa migrate overseas for work in order to continue building the rainbow for the family, they will be doing so as skilled labour migrants. Against the backdrop of a heavily-criticised Domestic Worker Roadmap, there is a general desire amongst people in Ponorogo for the Indonesian government to seriously consider the positive impacts of labour outmigration and develop policies sensitive to the aspirations of poorer households who rely on labour migration as a pathway towards attaining the good life for themselves and their families across generations.

¹ Ponorogo district has one of the highest overseas labour outmigration figures across the Indonesian archipelago. Each year, more than 10,000 people leave Ponorogo to work overseas. Consequently Ponorogo ranks in the top 10 – 15th out of over 400 regencies in labour outmigration figures in the last few years.

² 65 per cent of our respondents in the survey (n=201) were motivated to work in Singapore because they wanted to support a family member's educational pursuits. An open-access paper which details the research findings can be downloaded from the Migrating out of Poverty website (<http://migratingoutofpoverty.dfid.gov.uk/documents/wp10-platt-et-al-final.pdf>). Stemming from this research project, two policy briefs have also been published (<http://migratingoutofpoverty.dfid.gov.uk/documents/ari-rp001-policy-brief-19dec13.pdf> and <http://migratingoutofpoverty.dfid.gov.uk/documents/ari-rp001-policy-brief-2-final-jun14.pdf>).

On the flip side, while we often celebrate the achievements of migrant families who are able to reap the benefits of productive investments in their children's education, there is also a tendency to characterise some migrants as having 'failed'. Many parents migrate because they want to fund their children's education. Yet when their children decide to drop out of school (often after graduating from junior high school), both the migrant parent(s) and child(ren) are seen as 'failures'. These cases buttress cautionary tales of the negative effects of parental migration where children 'lack supervision'. As one mother in our latest research project recounts, "I worked so hard overseas so my child could have education. When he did not want to study anymore, I thought, what for should I continue my migration? ... So I came back."

The idea of 'failure' often features in the local community's perspectives of these youth school dropouts. Their parents are seen as 'failures' because migration did not yield positive investments in educational attainment; their parents have 'failed' in providing quality care to their left-behind children; young people have also 'failed' their parents for not wanting to attend school anymore because they are 'lazy' or 'immature', traits associated with the lack of parental supervision. Yet such negative labelling ('failure' and 'lazy') do not accurately reflect the realities of these households. Young people often pity their aged parents (*kasihan bapak ibu*) who are toiling overseas to fund their education. As they pine for their parents' return, over time as they become older they feel the desire to reduce their parents' financial burden. Hence many youths from poorer households are keen to (or have decided to) stop schooling – often 'for the time being' (but it remains unclear how many of them return to school eventually) – and start working so that they can share the breadwinning responsibilities with their aged parents. Nisa is contemplating working immediately after obtaining her nursing diploma (instead of going to university) as her father is getting old too.

Instead of casting these youths and their migrant parents/households in a negative light, we – together with the Indonesian government and local communities – should ask how poorer households can be supported to work towards their aspirations across generations. Today in Indonesia, one in six persons is between the ages 15 – 24 years old. As the then-Minister for Youth and Sports His Excellency Roy Suryo Notodiprodjo said, the 'youth bulge...represents a surge in the potential for social and economic benefit – but we must ensure that this potential is leveraged wisely'³. For a start, children from poorer (migrant) households can be encouraged to remain in school so that they can be better educated and skilled. One way to do this is to expand and increase the accessibility of current government assistance such as the Indonesia Smart Card (*Kartu Indonesia Pintar*⁴), so that children from poor households do not feel that they are adding onto their parents' financial burdens by continuing their educational pursuits. Hopefully, like Nisa, these children can then obtain useful skills and knowledge, and become competent workers and/or skilled migrants who will give themselves and their families better lives in the long term.

Khoo Choon Yen, Asia Research Institute

We are currently going on school tours to screen a film titled 'Small Town, Big Dreams' (Mimpi Anak Desa), which features Nisa's tale as well as the stories of youth aspirations in migrant-sending villages in Indonesia, together with two other migrant work-centered films commissioned by the Migrating out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium. Please write to our Communications Officer, Kellynn Wee (kellynn.wee@nus.edu.sg) if you are keen to screen the film(s) in your school for your students. A public release is scheduled at the end of the year.

Is There Life Beyond Being a "Maid"?

*Zonta International is a network that aims to promote the advancement of women and girls. Last July, **John Gee**, Chair of TWC2's Research Sub-Committee, spoke to members of the Zonta Club of Singapore on the theme of "Is there life beyond being a "maid"? Below is a slightly adapted version of that talk.*

I might have spoken with you this evening about laws, regulations and well-recognised questions of domestic workers' rights, but I think you're all probably familiar with these things. Instead, I'd like to speak about something that is less tangible, but would, nevertheless, be important and a subject close to the hearts of Zonta's members, concerned as you are to promote the advancement of women and girls.

³ UNFPA Indonesia. 2013. "Ministry of Youth and Sports and United Nations to Collaborate on Youth Development in Indonesia | News | UNFPA." <http://indonesia.unfpa.org/news/2015/11/ministry-of-youth-and-sports-and-united-nations-to-collaborate-on-youth-development-in-indonesia>.

⁴ The Indonesia Smart Card provides financial assistance to support the educational pursuits of children from poor households all the way to university education. To know more about the programme, you can read the information from <http://www.tnp2k.go.id/en/programmes/programmes-to-create-productive-families/smart-indonesia-card/>.

This is the question of opportunities for personal development and achievement for domestic workers. It's something that has weighed on my mind for some time, arising from my voluntary work and social contact with domestic workers. I've met women who have struck me as very clever and resourceful and women who have interests that I wouldn't have expected, and who have enquiring minds, and I've been left with a feeling of injustice. It seemed unfair that they should not have had, and may never have, the chance to develop their talents and to act on their interests. I've wondered whether, if they had a glance of what they might have had or done, how would they feel? Would they be like children who see toys their parents could never afford on television or in a shop window? Would it be encouraging or dispiriting for them to see a potential that they may well never realise? Could it really be the case that, with all the obstacles they might face, they would be happier not knowing what might have been? But isn't that like saying: Don't dare hope? Don't dare try? I'd like to see their hopes fulfilled and their efforts to find their reward more often.

Women who become domestic workers generally do so in order to support their families, whether that involves supporting brothers, sisters or children while they are being educated, or enabling their families to pay their way, or something else.

Sadly, it is very common for them to obtain very little advantage for themselves from their sacrifices and their labour. Once they have paid their placement costs, many hand over almost all their earnings to their relatives. Some of those who do manage to save money for themselves return home and invest it in setting up a small business, but the rate of failure is high, though I understand not generally higher than for start-ups in general. If they are fortunate, those they supported will feel some sense of responsibility for supporting them in their turn, but this is not necessarily the case.

Their lives might have been very different - and they should have been.

All of us come to a time in our lives when we look back and think of things that we know we might have done, if only we'd had the chance, or of how our lives might have turned out if only we had made other choices. You could argue that these are two different things: our choices are our own, and we have to take responsibility for them, whereas a lack of opportunity is not our own fault, but I don't think it's as simple as that. We can only make choices on the basis of the circumstances in which we live and on the basis of our knowledge and experience at the time we have to make them. They can restrict the choices that we have in practice. We recognise the factors of knowledge and experience whenever we say, "If only I'd known then what I know now."

Empowerment, or the lack of power, is another factor determining the choices a person makes. We can feel constrained by our obligations to family members or overawed by an older authority figure, even if we have misgivings about their advice.

Finally, and for many people, most importantly, our economic circumstances can be such as to force us to give up our aspirations in order to work at a job that may be unfulfilling and poorly paid, but that provides a living. Our choices are not made in a vacuum and they are not necessarily all our own.

This is certainly true for women who work as domestic workers. All of those who come to Singapore have at least a basic education, but some have more: they may have gone to do a college course that would give them a professional qualification, for example. However, most do not have the opportunity to realise their personal potential, or to make use of the qualifications they may have gained in their preferred line of work.

They come from families that feel a need to expand their income, because they will have difficulties paying their way otherwise. They normally come from communities in which sons are valued over daughters, and so, if they are young women, they may be encouraged to earn money to remit primarily in order to support a brother through his education, or to give the family the support it needs for it to hold on to its land, which parents hope will ultimately be inherited by one or more sons. Their families' way of thinking is that they will marry one day and become part of someone else's family and so there is not much benefit to be gained by keeping them in education beyond the minimum number of years required by their government.

Most of those who become domestic workers are first recruited when they are quite young. Singapore requires that to come here, they should be at least 23, but in most other jurisdictions, there is either a lower age limit or none at all. In any case, even here, there are younger women whose families are so keen to have them earning money that they come on fake documents that give a false age; I've met women who started work here at the age of 16. You probably saw reports of an abuse case in April in which the young woman who was hit was a 17-year-old from Myanmar.

Although internationally, the generally accepted age of adulthood is 18, people in their late teens can be unsure of themselves. A young woman may not know how to be assertive about her own wishes and ambitions, and she may, in any case, feel that it would be selfish of her to go against her parents' wishes. Older women who are married may feel that they have no choice but to put the needs of husband and children before their own.

Once they start working as domestic workers, much depends on the goodwill and consideration of their employers. More often than not, domestic workers work long hours (typically, in Singapore, 14 or more a day), and perform a wide range of jobs around the house. There are good reasons why, historically, feminists and many other progressives saw housework as constricting, wearying and soul-destroying. They saw getting women out of the home and into paid work as a vital step in their empowerment and emancipation. They therefore not only called for career opportunities to be opened up, but for women to be enabled to make use of them through the provision of social care for children and the sharing of domestic work by men, among other things.

I think that there was and is a lot to be said for this perspective, without disparaging women who freely choose to devote time and energy to being homemakers. It's about real choices for all women, and that must include those who come from economically poorer and more disadvantaged backgrounds.

Development that ensures improved living standards and opportunities for all is one of the biggest challenges of the modern world. It is now widely recognised that progress for women should not only be seen as a by-product of this development, or as a goal in isolation, but also as essential to progress for all: educated women, women taking part in community decision-making, women making choices about family size and spending priorities, women with developed abilities passing on knowledge and their example to their children are all vital elements of development, and generally, these are happier, more fulfilled women too.

In countries of origin of domestic workers, achieving such progress involves changing embedded ways of thinking, which is happening little by little, and yet not fast enough for millions of girls and young women.

In Singapore, what we can do to support the regional advancement of women from rural areas in less developed countries may be limited, but I think there are possibilities nevertheless.

At the most basic level, we can start with our relationships with the domestic workers we employ in our own homes. The happiest domestic workers and those who find the most fulfilment from their employment here are women who have been fortunate enough or determined enough, in some cases, to find good employers who are reasonable in what they ask workers to do, who practice open communication with them rather than simply issuing orders and who allow their workers free time.

Domestic workers in these situations learn. They learn from what they see, hear and read; some keep dictionaries to expand their ability to communicate in another language. Learning includes critical assimilation of lessons from how they see us behaving and Singapore society functioning: many foreign workers see the orderliness, cleanliness and near absence of corruption as positive features of the host society. Of course, they note what women here do or don't do, and it is not without influence. The most ambitious workers may do courses at weekends: I'd estimate that on any Sunday, there may be some 5,000 women doing one course or another. Logically, they can only do this if they have regular days off, so the extent to which we respect their right to a weekly day off has a direct bearing on whether they can undertake such courses or not.

We should not shy away from talking about money matters with workers, individually or as a society. Women are commonly seen as more caring and nurturing than men, which are good qualities, but they can be presumed upon to take advantage of some. It is not selfish for a domestic worker to insist on keeping part of the fruits of her own labour, and to provide for her own future. Domestic workers here should have their own bank accounts. They should be encouraged to accept their entitlement to put money by for themselves, and not see themselves as being under an obligation to give everything to their families and needy relatives. If that means being secretive about their savings, not mentioning a pay rise to relatives or arranging a deferred payment of their final salary and any bonus when they return home, then so be it. Of course, being decently paid in the first place can help.

At the level of policy, I hope that Singapore will introduce changes that will work well both for women who may be recruited to work here and for Singaporean society.

Everyone here is aware that the proportion of elderly people in Singapore is growing and that the need for diverse kinds of elderly care is bound to grow alongside that. Singaporeans also want their children to be looked after well, and likewise, those who have family members with disabilities want to provide well for them. Yet the great majority of people who hire domestic workers look for general purpose workers, not specialised workers who can focus on particular forms of care. I've been told by employment agents here that some have tried providing specialised workers but they did not get much uptake.

A rethink is needed. I'd suggest that attitudes need to change and public education would help. That should go along with reformed policies on recruitment and training to have more of the women who would otherwise have become domestic workers trained as specialised care workers, who would be entitled to clearly defined hours and could expect improved pay and status as they gained in experience. They would also have certified qualifications that might give them better prospects when they eventually return home or move on to work in another country.

Underpinning all approaches to advancing girls and women from relatively poor backgrounds should be a standpoint that asserts that creating opportunities for them is worthwhile in itself. It doesn't need justification in terms of contributions to national development or familial welfare; it is enough that it is wanted by girls and by women and is to their advantage.

What I have outlined here seems inadequate to meet the challenge of opening up opportunities for girls and women in communities from which domestic workers are recruited, but I hope that steps such as these could move things in the right direction. I think that it is evident to everyone that it is important for young people to be provided with the education, advice, freedom and opportunities to make informed choices about their own futures. I hope, from what I've said, that it's clear that I also believe that human beings ought to have opportunities to make changes to the course of their lives as they grow older.

People change as the years pass and they gain in experience; they understand themselves better and become more certain of their own wants and needs. No-one should be trapped on one career track simply because they have taken a first step or so along that route. I think that has to apply to women in jobs seen as having a low status and low value to society (despite evidence to the contrary), as well as to anyone else, and so that's why it's important to think of expanding opportunities for those who have already become domestic workers: it is not just a question of whether or not they become domestic workers in

the first place. It should be possible for paid domestic work to become a step on the way to a life that a woman may find more rewarding, not a path that ends all too often in destitution or a life of unpaid domestic work, accepted not out of choice, but because there was none.

It can be done.

Space for Migrant Workers

Member of Parliament Denise Phua has, in the past, made an effort to be understanding of migrant workers' problems, so migrant worker rights activists were disappointed when she made a call on the government to fence off residents' areas from foreign workers and do more to disperse them from Little India and it only made things worse that she said of gatherings of these workers: "Congregations of such high density are walking time-bombs and public disorder incidents waiting to happen."

TWC2 executive committee member Debbie Fordyce wrote to the Straits Times. Her letter was published 11 April 2016:

Provide more public spaces for foreign workers

Viewing gatherings of transient workers as public disorder incidents waiting to happen and suggesting ring-fencing communal areas promote unsubstantiated and unconstructive prejudices towards Singapore's transient workers (*"MP says sorry for remarks about foreign workers"*; last Saturday, and *"Security measures are reviewed at hot spots"*; last Thursday).

While improving the amenities and facilities of dormitories purpose-built for transient workers is encouraged, this should be done in order to improve the living conditions in dormitories, rather than to prevent workers from moving freely within Singapore.

We should also bear in mind that improvements to housing can reduce a worker's salary through deductions to pay for these improvements.

Wherever workers live, South Asian low-wage workers are drawn to areas around Little India during their free time.

They make use of the services and amenities there, such as remittance houses, temples and mosques, and shops and restaurants that cater to their needs.

Equally important is their desire to spend free time away from the dormitory and to meet friends, socialise, relax and share news of family and community.

Rather than restricting these men and ring-fencing them from areas where they come in contact with Singapore residents, we should consider the importance of their having regular contact with friends and countrymen, and avoid suggestions that foreign workers are an underclass to be excluded from certain public areas.

Workers are largely aware of residents' need for security in and around their homes, and prefer to gather in open areas away from residential spaces.

Rather than placing physical restrictions, a more progressive option would be to provide more public space with seating and shade in areas that South Asian men naturally congregate.

This will contribute to a vibrant community and healthy social interaction.

Deborah D. Fordyce (Ms), Member, Executive Committee, Transient Workers Count Too

As the letter notes, Ms Phua did make an apology later. On Facebook, she wrote, I should not have used the phrase "walking time-bombs" to describe congregations of high density and stressed her sympathy for migrant workers.

MFA Appeal

Migrant Forum in Asia has sent out the following appeal for support for the Nepal government's stand that employers, not migrant workers, should pay any fees for their recruitment.

We are writing to share with you some significant updates from MFA members in Nepal who have been campaigning in support of the Government of Nepal's Free Visa Free Ticket Policy. This policy is in line with our Recruitment Reform Campaign Priority of Zero Fees for Migrant Workers!

We are calling on all our members and partners to [sign a Change.org petition in support of Nepali Civil Society](#). Groups in Nepal have already initiated a signature campaign in support of the Free Visa Free Ticket policy, which has already amassed more than 50,000 signatures! They have submitted their petition to the relevant authorities in Nepal. By signing the Change.org petition, you will add your voice to their calls, and to renew our working group's calls for Zero Fees and Employer Pays.

The petition calls on the Nepal Government to Stand Firm on their policy decision and to fully implement and monitor the Free

Visa Free Ticket Policy. It also calls on governments of other countries of origin to adopt similar policies in support of migrant worker rights!

Please sign the petition here, and share widely in your networks!

<https://www.change.org/p/government-of-nepal-stand-firm-implement-free-visa-free-ticket-policy-for-nepali-migrant-workers>

Background Info...

In July 2015, the Government of Nepal passed a law obligating foreign employers to bear the visa and flight ticket costs for Nepali migrant workers that they hire. The “Free Visa Free Ticket” rule applies to migrant workers bound for seven destination countries: Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Malaysia.

This new policy serves to prevent the fraudulent activities of recruitment agencies, which charge excessive fees to workers putting them at risk of debt bondage, forced labour, human trafficking, and other labour and human rights violations. This policy decision comes after years of advocacy led by migrant workers, their families, civil society organizations, and trade unions.

Recruitment agencies in Nepal have responded with force, challenging the government’s policy. They claim that the “employer pays” model will reduce the demand for Nepali workers abroad—a claim that has yet to be confirmed. In March 2016, the Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies halted their migrant recruitment operations for an indefinite period, demanding that the policy be revised.

In the face of recruitment agency resistance, migrant civil society, led by the National Network for Safe Migration, has redoubled its efforts, calling on the government to STAND FIRM with migrant workers. Civil society actions in support of the government’s policy have been held in Kathmandu and at the district level throughout the country.

A signature campaign in support of the Free Visa Free Ticket policy has amassed more than 50,000 signatures and has been submitted to the relevant authorities in Nepal. Add your name here: <https://www.change.org/p/government-of-nepal-stand-firm-implement-free-visa-free-ticket-policy-for-nepali-migrant-workers>

Timeline of Actions in Nepal...

1 April 2016: Civil society staged a demonstration at Bhadrakali temple, outside the Prime Minister’s office and other ministries including the Labour and Employment. A delegation visited relevant ministries, including the office of the PM and the National Human Rights Commission, to hand over a petition for the effective implementation of the Free Visa Free Ticket policy and to ensure Nepali workers do not have to pay recruitment costs.

2 April 2016: Civil society held a multi-stakeholder discussion on the issue, calling on human rights activists, trade unions, and media for solidarity. The meeting came up with a joint statement with demands related to zero fees.

3-5 April 2016: Civil society staged demonstration in front of the entrance to the Ministries, including the Prime Minister’s office, the National Planning Commission, and the Secretariat of the Parliament demanding the effective implementation of the policy. A delegation met with senior human rights activists, senior trade union leaders, and political leaders to gather support and momentum. In response to the call by the campaign to express solidarity with the campaign, representatives from 18 districts joined the demonstration and handed over 50,000 signatures collected from the districts to the Minister of Labour and Employment.

6-8 April 2016: Civil society will continue to demonstrate at the same location and meet with the political leaders, government officials, trade unions, and hopefully the President and the Prime minister (appointments requested). Activists will continue collecting signatures and hand the petition to relevant authorities at the Ministry for Labour and Employment.

Thank you for supporting this important campaign!

MFA

LOG ONTO OUR WEBSITE www.twc2.org.sg AND JOIN OUR FACEBOOK PAGE FOR UP-TO-DATE NEWS, EVENTS AND FEATURES, AND DEVELOPMENTS IN THE COMMUNITY OF MIGRANT WORKER ADVOCATES.

TO HELP ENSURE TWC2 CONTINUES ITS WORK TO RAISE AWARENESS AND IMPROVE CONDITIONS FOR MIGRANT WORKERS, PLEASE CONSIDER SUPPORTING OUR WORK THROUGH A DONATION. YOU COULD SEND A CHEQUE, DO A BANK TRANSFER (details below), or LOG ON TO THE WEBSITE and donate through the fundraising portals sggives.org or give.sg.

Account name: Transient Workers Count Too

Bank: DBS Bank Ltd Singapore, 12 Marina Boulevard, Marina Bay Financial Centre, Tower 3, Singapore 018982

Type: Current Account

Number: 006-900625-0

Bank code: 7171

Swift Code: DBSSSGSG

If paying in US\$ from overseas, provide details of DBS agent bank as follows: Pay to Bank of New York Mellon, New York (SWIFT address:

IRVTUS3N) FED ABA: 021000018. For account of: DBS Bank Ltd, Singapore (SWIFT address: DBSSSGSG)

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