

Indonesian Domestic Workers in Singapore: Experiences of Recruitment, Training and Return

Introduction

In 2008, there were over 180,000 domestic workers in Singapore. The largest numbers came from the Philippines and Indonesia.¹

In working with women employed as domestic workers, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) has concentrated its attention on the problems they face in Singapore, where we can have the most impact, but we have been aware of the wider regional context of labour migration. This shapes the terms upon which migrant workers come to Singapore and the ultimate balance of advantage from the experience.

In the following pages, we present the results of a survey that focuses on two main stages of the processes that Indonesian women who decide to become domestic workers go through. They are stages that occur within their home country: recruitment and return, in the latter case, with specific reference to Terminal 3 at Jakarta's Sukarno-Hatta International Airport. The survey begins with general questions to provide a picture of our contributors, and concludes with a section that concentrates on the financial costs and benefits of coming to work in Singapore.

Methodology

The survey was undertaken in co-operation with ENGENDER, a Hongkong-based project that has sponsored similar surveys in Hongkong, Taiwan and Macao. We hope that this survey will complement those earlier undertakings.

This relationship played its part in shaping the composition of the survey. For the sake of comparability, we took the questions asked

¹ 'The Manpower Ministry said it does not track the number of maids leaving Singapore, but its spokesman said the number of foreign domestic workers here actually rose from 180,000 at the end of 2007 to 190,000 at the end of last year.' ('Demand down by up to 20%, say agencies', a sidebar to 'Maids scramble for jobs as expat bosses pull out', Judith Tan, 'Straits Times', 23/3/'09). The Ministry of Manpower does not give any breakdown by nationality of numbers of domestic workers, and estimates vary greatly. In July 2009, a source at the Indonesian embassy told TWC2 that there were 85,000 Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore.

in previous surveys as a starting point. They were adapted to the Singapore context, with some questions added to reflect local circumstances. The previous survey forms were in English, but we prepared those for this survey in Bahasa Indonesia as well as English, so that participants would understand them more readily.

The sample size is relatively small – just 100 workers. We believe that it is quite representative. Care was taken to ensure that there was a spread of interviews between different localities in Singapore and a range of circumstances: some interviews were conducted at a shelter run by the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), so the voices of women there are represented, but the great majority of interviewees were with women currently working for and living in the homes of their employers.

One important qualification to this statement is necessary. It was conducted almost entirely among workers who are able to leave their place of employment. A significant proportion of Indonesian domestic workers are not given time off or allowed out alone by their employers. Some estimates put the proportion at over a half.² It must be presumed that, in general, their circumstances will compare unfavourably with those of women who are able to have regular days off and leave their workplaces. Nevertheless, this may only have a limited distorting effect upon the survey findings, as most relate to events before and after periods of employment in Singapore.

The survey was conducted between 16 November and 9 December 2008. 91 questionnaires were completed between 16 and 24 November, and the remainder during the following days. Somewhat over a half of those were collected in places where workers gathered, including malls in Orchard Road and Jurong, and they

² Various surveys over the years have indicated that around half of domestic workers overall do not have days off. One of the most recent was by the government's Feedback Unit (now renamed REACH) in 2006, based on interviews with 526 workers. It was reported exclusively in the Chinese language *Lianhe Zhaobao*, and the headline neatly sums up its conclusions: 'More Than 90 % of Domestic Workers Happy With Their Work, But More Than Half Do Not Have a Day Off' (Ding Lee Yong, LHZB, 2 August 2006). The survey concluded that 'close to 45%' of respondents were given at least one day off a month. Conversations with domestic workers and employment agencies suggest that the proportion of Indonesian workers who have days off is lower than the proportion of Filipinas who have them.

were completed on the spot. The remaining nine were collected through worker-volunteers asking women working around their area of employment to complete the forms.

The timing of the survey means that all the answers should be considered to reflect circumstances prior to the global financial crisis that began to hit the region hard from September 2008. This crisis will not have changed conditions for the better, it can be said with confidence.

Some statements made by workers have been quoted in this report. In all cases, the workers' own words have been kept; they have only been edited for spelling and punctuation. Any addition made for the sake of clarity is enclosed in brackets: (.....)

March 2009

Acknowledgements are due to many. ENGENDER partnered TWC2 and sponsored this research. Yvonne Bach, a Ph.D. student and member of the DFG Research Training Group "Transnational Social Support" at the University of Mainz, Germany, took on the big challenge of collecting interviews. Institutions that co-operated with her in the process include the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), FILODEP (which, though being the Filipino Ongoing Development Program, opens its courses to domestic workers of other nationalities) and Aidha. John Gee collated the findings. Last but not least, all the Indonesian domestic workers who co-operated patiently in this research deserve our thanks and appreciation, particularly the Indonesian Family Network, Atien and Nurifah, who were of great assistance.

Survey Analysis

Profile of the Workers

Most of the workers were in their twenties, with 33 in the 21-25 age group and 38 in the 26-30 age group. Of the remaining 29, 13 were 31-35 and 12, 36-40. At the further ends of the age spectrum, one worker was in the 41-50 and one in the 51 and over category. Two workers were in the 18-20 group, although Singapore has banned the employment of workers under 23 years of age since January 2005. Some of the 21-25 age group were also certainly under 23.³

The great majority of women came from Java. 31 were from East Java, 48 from Central Java, and 14 from West Java, including two from Jakarta. Five women came from Sumatera and two from eastern Indonesia, one each from Sulawesi and Nusa Tenggara Timur.

Asked about the main source of income of their families, 78 women responded that they were farmers, four said that they were factory workers, and three answered 'migrant worker overseas'. Of the remainder, ten indicated that their families' main source of income was some form of private business, one family's main earner was a fisher, one a construction worker, and two gave no answer.

In short, the typical Indonesian domestic worker in the sample would be a Javanese from a farming family, aged in her 20s or 30s.

Incentive to Recruitment

Recruiters actively seek out women who they think might be persuaded to work overseas. Their families usually have to be convinced to agree, particularly if they are young, unmarried and living in their parents' home. Money is sometimes given to families by recruiters in order to encourage them to allow or to press the

³ Several women's comments revealed as much. It is not unusual for women who are under 23 to obtain documents that suggest they are older than they really are in order to qualify to work in Singapore. It also happened when the age limit was 18: one argument for raising the qualifying age for employment in Singapore was that it would be more difficult for legal minors (under 18s) to pass as being 23 or more, rather than 18 or over.

woman to go abroad. The money can be a strong incentive, but it is not a free gift, as it is invariably recovered later on, constituting part of the debt borne by the great majority of domestic workers when they begin their employment abroad.

A little over a quarter of the women surveyed said that their families had been given money by recruiters when the possibility of them going overseas to work was discussed. 27 women said that this had happened. Discarding one probably inaccurate answer, the amounts mentioned ranged from a low of Rp. 40.000 (40.000 rupiahs)/US\$3.44⁴ to a high of Rp. 2.000.000/US\$172. Most were in the mid to lower levels of this range:

Under Rp.100.000/US\$8.6	1
Rp.100.000/US\$8.6	1
Rp.200.000/US\$17.2	2
Rp.300.000/US\$25.8	5
Rp.400.000/US\$34.4	0
Rp.500.000/US\$43.0	7
Rp.600.000/US\$51.6	1
Rp.700.000/US\$60.2	2
Rp.800.000/US\$68.8	2
Rp.900.000/US\$77.4	0
Rp.1.000.000/US\$86.0	2
Rp.2.000.000/US\$172.0	1

One of the women said that the recruiter gave Rp. 800.000 (US\$68.2) to her, not to her family. One woman who said that her family was not given money said that she paid Rp. 300.000 ((US\$25.8) for a sponsor.

Experiences with the recruitment agency/PJTKI⁵ in Indonesia

91 women responded 'Yes' to the question: 'Did you apply to (a) recruitment agency/PJTKI to work abroad?' One more answered

⁴ Based on an exchange rate as of Rp. 1000 = US\$0.086. This was the rate on 14 November 2008, the first day of the survey. There has been considerable movement of the rupiah against the US dollar over the years. The rupiah-Singapore dollar exchange rate on 14 November 2008 was Rp.1000: S\$0.1305.

⁵ PJTKI (Perusahaan Jasa Tenaga Kerja Indonesia) or Indonesian Overseas and Domestic Employment Agency. This is how an Indonesian employment agency is known.

'No', but her further responses indicated that she did. Of the eight who came by other routes, three said that they travelled over with their employers from Indonesia and three said that they came to Singapore as tourists.

Three out of every four women found out about the recruitment agency through people they knew well. Asked how they had heard about the recruitment agency, close to half the women (44) said that it was through friends, and nearly one in three (31) said that she had heard through relatives. Only five said that they had found out about the agency through newspapers. Of the remainder, six said that they were informed by their sponsor/recruiter, and two said it was their own idea.

The drawing power of Jakarta, as Indonesia's capital and business hub, was illustrated by the workers' response to a question about the location of their recruitment agency. 32 said that their agency was in Jakarta.

A comparison the workers' origins and their responses about the location of their recruitment agencies revealed the following:

Agency site Worker's place of origin	East Java	Central Java	West Java	Jakarta	Other localities
East Java	15	0	4	8	3
Central Java	2	24	5	13	0
West Java	0	2	1	7	1
Jakarta	0	0	0	1	0
Other	1	0	1	3	1

None of the women from Sumatera went to agencies there. In each case in the 'Other localities' category, women referred to training centres in Batam and Bintan, the islands closest to Singapore.

Interviewees were asked about what arrangements were made for them when they had registered with a recruitment agency – meaning where did they stay? The great majority (87) indicated that they stayed in the PJTKI dormitory. Six said that they had gone to work with a family before going on to their placement, though it should be noted that three of them (plus one more whose answers were inconsistent) responded to questions about training centres in a way that suggested that they had also spent time in dormitories.

One woman said that she had stayed in a dormitory and then lived with a family. None had remained at home awaiting placement.

Learning at the Training Centre

Over half of the women spent more than one month but less than three in a training centre:

1 week	2 weeks	3 weeks	1 month	2 months	3 months	4 months	Over 4 months	No answer
5 (including 1 for 1 day and 1 for 2.	7	3	36	20	13	4	1 – 5 months; 2 – 6 months	1

The longer stays of over a month normally reflect the time that workers spent waiting for placement. Complaints by employers in Singapore about inadequate training of domestic workers are common, but our sample suggested that a large majority of the workers at least had the time they needed for basic training.

The question that then arises is: what were the women taught? When asked about the kind of training they had received, 83-86 women had been trained in cooking, house cleaning, ironing and language skills, all of which respond to housework needs in a foreign country. Figures fall in other defined categories.

Cooking	House cleaning	Ironing	Babysitting	Language skills	Taking care of the elderly	Orientation about destination country	Being taught how to cope when scolded/yelled at by the employers	Others
85	86	83	72	84	65	57	55	5

It may be noted that in both the categories of ‘babysitting’ (in retrospect, ‘child-minding’ would have been a more appropriate heading) and ‘taking care of the elderly’, the number of women saying that they received training is somewhat lower than for the categories of daily house care. Official policy in Singapore is to discourage the employment of foreign domestic workers unless a family can argue a definite need: primarily, the necessity of caring for children or elderly people. Relieving women of the need to undertake such work through employment of a domestic worker is meant to allow male and female household heads who have an

income sufficient to hire a worker to go out and undertake paid work. This was a fundamental consideration of Singapore's government when it authorised the employment of domestic workers from abroad in 1978.⁶

In two categories of training that directly concern the well-being of the workers themselves and their capacity to cope with an unfamiliar environment (orientation about the destination country and coping with being shouted at by employers), there is a further drop in levels of training. One worker in the 'others' category wrote, *'Told to be obedient and not tell about our right'*.

Contact with Family

For most women, their time at the training centre may be their first lengthy experience of being away from their families. Migrant workers value communication with their families, for whom they have made the sacrifice of leaving home to work overseas. Being able to find out about home news and hear familiar voices can be a great comfort to workers taking a big step into the unknown.

Asked whether their agency had allowed them to visit their families in their hometowns, 30 women said 'Yes' and 62 said 'No'. They were then asked whether they had made visits to their families while at the training centre. 26 said that they had. Of those, 20 had said that they were permitted to go by their agencies; ten of the women who said that they were given permission said that they did not visit their families, which might be explicable as a result of travel costs or other considerations. It seems a little harder to explain how six women who said that they were refused permission to go home nevertheless said that they did go.

Complications increase with the following question. Interviewees were asked if they had answered 'yes' to the preceding questions, what conditions had the agency arranged for them? 53 women answered this question, although in response to the previous question ('During your stay in the centre, were you able to visit

⁶ Singapore's policy considerations in deciding to issue work permits for foreign domestic workers in 1978 are discussed in 'Ties That Bind: State Policy and Migrant Female Domestic Helpers in Singapore' (Shirlena Huang and Brenda S. A. Yeoh in *Geoforum* Vol.27. No 4, pp 479-493, 1996)

your family?)’ only half that number said that they had gone home. Perhaps women who said that they did not go home and yet answered the question relating to their conditions for doing so were indicating what they would have had to do in order to be able to go home, but it may be that they found the question confusing. Whatever the case, this difficulty should be borne in mind should a similar survey be conducted in years to come, and due attention given to resolving the evident difficulties in the present survey.

The answers nevertheless give some pointers to the terms agencies set for women to visit their families.

57 women in all gave answers to these three questions that appear consistent: 30 said that they were not allowed to go home, did not go and they did not answer the last question; 20 said that they were allowed to go home, did so and they answered the last question; seven said they were permitted to go home, that they did not do so and they did not answer the last question.

32 women gave answers that appear inconsistent: 23 said that they were refused permission to go home, did not go, yet answered the final question; six said that they were refused permission, went home and answered the last question; three said that they were given permission to go home, did not go, but answered the last question. The answers may be summarised thus:

Conditions for going home	Paid money as guarantee	Left family property documents as guarantee	No conditions	Others
Women who gave consistent answers in response to three questions (20)	5	5	9	1 (Asked to give letter explaining why she wanted permission to go home)
No permission, didn't go home, but answered question on conditions for going home (23)	18	3	2	0
Denied permission, went home, answered question on conditions for going home (7)	4	1	1	0
Given permission, didn't go, but answered question on conditions for going home (3)	3	0	0	0

Overall, it would seem that agencies are worried that workers who have an opportunity to go home may decide not to return to them. This may explain the high proportion – about two in three – of refusals to let workers go home and also the conditions set for workers to go. If the testimony seems contradictory to some extent, its general emphasis is descriptive of a restrictive approach towards domestic workers’ freedom of movement.

The interviewees were next asked ‘During your stay in the training centre of PJTKI, how did you communicate with your family?’ They were reminded that they could respond in any appropriate category. Some indicated two or three means, and one indicated four.

By calling	Mobile phone / SMS	By letter	They visited me	Others
60	17	26	31	2

Of the ‘Others’, one woman said that she visited her family, and another responded ‘Not allowed’.

Accommodation Conditions

Dormitory accommodation is standard for workers at training centres. Only one worker said that she had a private room and, as the same worker had earlier said that she did not come via an agency to Singapore (but answered questions suggesting that she had), this answer must be treated with caution. The majority of interviewees stayed in rooms along with up to 19 other women. 23 stayed in significantly larger dormitories in rooms for 91 or more women.

Rooms for:	Number who said they stayed there	Rooms for:	Number who said they stayed there
1-10	29	71-80	0
11-20	15	81-90	3
21-30	5	91-100	10
31-40	5	100+	2
41-50	4	200+	2
51-60	4	300+	9
61-70	1	Other	2

Asked how many people in total lived at their training centres, the numbers again tended to fall into two major clusters:

50-100 people	100-150 people	150-200 people	Over 200	Others
40	15	5	27	5

Of the others, 3 indicated that the numbers at their centres were rather higher than in the listed categories; one woman said '1000'. One woman said there were less than 50 people at her training centre and the fifth said that the most women that were at her centre was 12-15.

A question on how many bathrooms there were at the training centres indicated that the great majority of women went to centres that had between 1 and 5 bathrooms:

a. Between 1 – 5 bathrooms	b. Between 6 – 10 bathrooms	c. Open bathroom for everyone	d. Others
52	26	12	5

Two women answered b) and c) positively. Of the others, three gave answers suggesting provision at their centres was in category a). One, who stayed at a centre with over 1000 women, said it had 'more than 20 bathrooms', and the fifth woman gave no indication either way.

As the adequacy of bathroom provision would depend upon how many women needed to be able to have access to the bathrooms, the answers to the last two questions were correlated, omitting the two responses described in the preceding sentence:

Women in Dormitory	Under 100 people	Between 100 – 150 people	Between 150 – 200 people	More than 200
No of Bathrooms				
1-5	33	10	2	9
6-10	5	4	2	15
Open bathrooms for everyone	2	2	0	8

Overall, provision appears to be on the low side for the number of women staying at the centres, especially considering times of day when the need for these facilities will peak. At the low end of bathroom provision, the difference between 1 and five bathrooms would make a lot of difference. This survey does not allow for these

figures to be assessed, but it might be noted in passing that two women specifically said that there was only one bathroom in their (100-150 women) dormitories, one said there were two bathrooms in her (50-100 women) dormitory, and one said that there were three bathrooms in her (150-200 women) dormitory.

Women typically staying at a dormitory for a month and more would be very unlikely to be able to bring all the products they might need from home, and so having access to places where they could buy them might be considered a necessity. Asked where they obtained their products of everyday use, 41 said that they arranged to buy them from a shop outside the training centre. 38 said they bought goods from a shop inside the centre. 15 said that they asked training centre staff to buy goods for them, 10 said that their families brought goods in when they came on visits and eight said that the training centre provided everything. One of two women who offered other answers noted that she was allowed to shop outside the centre on Saturdays and Sundays. The answers were not exclusive: some women filled in two or three categories, and one gave four answers.

Revisiting the results, it may be concluded that 41 women had the option of making choices for themselves with their money, whatever other options they may also have exercised, while 31 had no other option besides buying goods from the shop inside the centre. Eight of the women who asked training centre staff to buy goods for them did not give any other answer.

Health

The training centres were considered to have good or sufficient hygiene standards by 87 women. Only four found the standards poor, and none thought that they were very poor.

Three questions focused on health. Asked whether they fell sick while staying at the centres, 21 women said that they did and 71 said that they did not. 75 women said that the agency provided them with a medical check-up, but 17 said that it did not. The interviewees were then asked whether their agency provided them with a regular medical check-up. 39 said that it did; 31 said that it didn't, and 21 responded 'Sometimes', suggesting irregular rather than regular medical check-ups, but certainly more than one. One

worker said that she could not answer this question because she wasn't at the agency long enough to find out.

Work in a Family Home Arranged by an Agency

Some workers go to work for families in Indonesia before coming to Singapore. Four women said that they were made to work in a family, compared to 72 who said that they didn't work in a family. 21 said that they stayed in a training centre and worked for a family. This could be read as sleeping at the centre and going to work with families during the day, but one woman's response that she spent one month at the training centre and one with a family suggests that there might be varying understandings of what happened.

Women who said that they had worked for families were then asked how long they had done so. 23 said that it was for three months or less. The only one who said that she had worked longer than that (over six months) had given some inconsistent answers. While the structure of the questions does not allow a precise figure to be determined, the strong implication from the statements of the few women who offered more specific comments on the duration of their periods of work with families is that they were normally brief. *'For a few hours'*, mentioned one woman; *'one day'* said another. Three referred to a week, one to two weeks and one to 2-3 weeks: in short, no specific mention of a period of over one month was made.

This allows the conditions of work to be put into perspective. These interviewees were asked whether they had been paid for their work in the families and if so, how much:

Yes – How much?						No
Less than Rp. 100.000 (US\$8.6)	Rp. 101.000 – 200.000 (US\$17.2)	Rp. 201.000 – 300.000 (US\$25.8)	Rp. 301.000 – 400.000 (US\$34.4)	Rp. 401.000 – 500,000 (US\$43.0)	Rp. 501.000 +	
7	5	4	2	0	0	5

Two of the women who replied 'No' had said that they were only with the families for a week.

Seven women said that they were allowed to visit their own families while workers for those of other people; 17 said they were not.

Overall, periods of family placement appear to have been relatively short. They may be treated as part of training or seen as a way of occupying the workers prior to their departure for Singapore.

Conclusions Concerning Agency Experience

The interviewees were asked a series of four questions about their training experience. One did not answer any.

	Yes	Somewhat	Not at all
Overall, do you think the training has helped you in your work abroad?	71	18	2
Did the training make you knowledgeable about your rights as a foreign domestic worker in Singapore?	66	23	2
Did the training prevent you from experiencing abuses from your employers?	46	29	14
Did the training help you in any way to secure your two years of employment?	59	17	14

Responses suggest that the great majority of workers thought that their training had helped them workwise, and there was a slightly less solid majority who thought that it had helped them to know more about their rights in Singapore. Responses to the third question suggested that training centres were significantly less effective in providing workers with training that would help them to avoid experiencing abuse⁷. The full implications of this answer would only become fully clear if a further question had been asked to ascertain whether workers considered that they had suffered some form of abuse, but 14 out of 91 women saying that they didn't feel that their training had protected them from abuses at all is a high enough proportion to suggest that thought remedial action ought to be taken.

Further questions would also be needed to clarify the meaning of answers to the final question. A significant minority could have been expressing dissatisfaction with the quality of the training

⁷ The survey did not question workers on the kinds of abuses they had suffered. This would have required more extended interviews, particularly as there are different opinions among workers themselves about what constitutes abusive behaviour, and an issue such as sexual abuse may be of such sensitivity that interviews such as those conducted for this survey may not be the most suitable way to establish what the workers really think. For our current purposes, it is enough to establish that a significant number of women considered that they were ill-prepared to deal with abusive behaviour.

provided to them by the training centres, but the possibility cannot be dismissed that some of the women were asserting a confidence that it was their own industry and skills that secured their employment.

Experiences at Terminal Three of Sukarno-Hatta International Airport, Jakarta

The first part of the survey was devoted to the experiences of Indonesian women passing through the stages of the recruitment and training process before they left their country to come to work in Singapore. This next section concerns what happened to them immediately upon their return to Indonesia.

Terminal Three of Jakarta’s Sukarno-Hatta International Airport was supposedly set up for the benefit of returning domestic workers, so that they could be taken through immigration procedures efficiently and get on with their homeward journeys. Instead, it acquired a bad reputation as a place where hard-working women were cheated by people who preyed upon their vulnerability. The survey attempted to find out more about workers’ experience of Terminal Three.

96 women answered the questions in this section. 35 women said that they went through Terminal Three, though four added that it was just for transfer. 61 said that they didn’t, six saying that they went straight to Surabaya.

When asked whether they had ever tried to refuse to go to Terminal Three on their arrival in Jakarta, 20 said that they had and 16 said that they had not. The women who said that they had tried to refuse were asked what kind of reaction they had from ‘security at the airport’. Four said that they were welcome not to use Terminal Three, though one explained, *“Because my family fetched me.”*

20 women said that they were forced to go to Terminal Three, one adding that she faced harassment and verbal abuse.

Welcome you to choose not to go to Terminal 3	Forcing you to go to Terminal 3	Harassment and verbal abuse	Others
4	20	1	5

Four of the women who responded in the ‘others’ section reported abusive behaviour, and chose to recount their experiences:

-“She forced me, but I continually said I didn’t want to go. I resisted and finally I was not forced. This was because I went home alone.”

-“There was an official, who asked for my old passport ... I have a new one already, but he asked for money giving the reason that he wants to help so that I have a safe journey in the airport.”

-“Cos last time my employer only buy ticket until Jakarta so not choice I have to go to Terminal 3. After take bus until my house.”

-“They treated me like an animal.”

The fifth woman reported a happier experience:

-“They did not note that I am a domestic worker, because when I left the airport, I left it together with an Indonesian student, who studies in Malaysia.”

Interviewees who returned home via Terminal Three were asked, ‘When you were taken from arrival hall to Terminal 3 by bus, how were you treated?’

You were respected and treated well	You were harassed, threatened and asked to pay money	Nothing happened	Others
11	14	5	5

While some women evidently had no complaints about their treatment at this stage of their return, a little over a half did, if the comments given by the interviewees in the ‘Others’ section are taken into account. In all four women reported being asked for money, and two others said that they were asked for ‘cigarette money’ for the driver. One woman added concerning ‘cigarette money’: *“If we don’t give it, they will destroy our things.”* Later, she explicitly mentioned, *‘the kuli, who brings things to the bus’* as being one of those demanding money, so it was not always and only the driver who exacted improper payments during the bus transfer.

Three questions were asked about fees paid in Terminal Three. Of 33 women who responded to the question, ‘When you were

Terminal 3, did you pay fees?’ only six said that they did not. The other 27 said that they did, and most gave figures for what they paid out. The figures varied considerably:

Amount paid	Number paying	Amount paid	Number paying
Rp.5.000 (US\$0.43)	1	Rp.600.000 (US\$51.6)	1
Rp.25.000 (US\$2.15)	1	Rp.1.000.000 (US\$86)	1
Rp.50.000 (US\$4.3)	3	Rp.1.500.000 (US\$129)	2
Rp.100.000 (US\$8.6)	1	Rp.2.000.000 (US\$172)	1
Rp.200.000 (US\$17.2)	2	Rp.5.000.000 (US\$430)	1
Rp.300.000 (US\$25.8)	3		

In three instances, the amount mentioned coincides with that given for payments made for transportation home, but only the interviewee who paid Rp.1.000.000 explicitly says later on that she paid this amount for her transport home. Three women mentioned paying an ‘official’, two mentioned an ‘officer’, and one mentioned a ‘security guard’. One referred to ‘middlemen/illegal worker’.

Asked if they knew what they had paid for, 17 women said that they did not and 12 said that they did. Those who gave details (8) generally connected the payments to their journeys home, mentioning tickets and travel.

Asked why they paid the money, ten said that they felt obliged to, and 11 said that they were too afraid not to do so. One of the latter said, *‘Maybe something would happen in the bus’*. 11 women gave other reasons for handing over money, most of which suggested some form of coercion having been used to induce payment:

-“Because they forced and threatened me.”

-“They said for donation.”

-“Because I had to.”

-“If I don’t buy it is difficult to leave.”

-“I thinking maybe rules.”

-“Because they force us to pay.”

-“Because they ordered us to buy, if not, not allowed to leave.”

-*“They forced me to pay, ‘cos if not pay, can’t go out from terminal 3.”*

-*“Because I don’t want to stay overnight in the airport.”*

-*“I’m come late for next flight from Jakarta to Jogjakarta.”*

-*“Threatened – they would take away my belongings.”*

Transport Home

Family members picked up ten of the women when they left the terminal. Two left on their own, though one of those was simply going to another terminal. 22 said that they took transport provided by Terminal Three, one adding the comment that her family wanted to pick her up *‘but was not allowed, because they did not bring letter.’* The answer provided by another woman to the next question indicates that she also took the bus because her family were not allowed to pick her up.

The point about a letter was clarified by a subsequent question concerning requirements for a family member to pick up a worker from Terminal Three. 12 women said that family members needed to show documentation proving that they were relatives. Two said that they had to pay money, one adding, *“They asked for ransom.”* Eight said that relatives had to show a document and pay money. An explanation for the inconsistency between the number of interviewees who said that they were picked up by their families and the (larger) number who responded to this question may be found in workers offering their understanding of the conditions required for relatives to pick them up, in some cases, even when they did not do so, or, as two examples illustrate, in the number of families prevented from picking up their relatives.

The interviewees who paid for their journey home on transportation provided by Terminal Three give a wide range of prices charged. The larger sums seem excessive, although this is hard to evaluate thoroughly given that the questionnaire did not ask the women about the distance they had to travel to their current homes. However, the interviewees’ answers to the question concerning their region of origin allow some appreciation of this possible factor:

Place of Origin	East Java	Central Java	West Java (including Jakarta)	Sumatera
Amount Paid				
Nothing			1	
Rp.50.000 or less (US\$4.3)		3		
Rp.100.000 (US\$8.6)	2			
Rp.200.000 (US\$17.2)			1	
Rp.250.000 (US\$21.5)		1	1	
Rp.300.000 (US\$25.8)	1		2	1
Rp.400.000 (US\$34.4)	1	2		
Rp.500.000 (US\$43)	1		1	1
Rp.750.000 (US\$64.5)			1	
Rp.800.000 (US\$68.8)		1	1	
Rp.1.000.000 (US\$86)		1	1	
Rp.1.500.000 (US\$129)			1	

These charges appear eccentric, given that the distance from the airport to any destination in West Java must be considerably less than those to destinations in East and Central Java. Factors other than variations in mileage, including irregular extraction of payments from the workers, would seem to explain these inconsistencies. One woman recounted that when some women complained, they were told, *“You are the foreign exchange heroes. That’s why you have to pay again!”*

Most of the women (22 out of 27) found that drivers wanted extra payments from them, in spite of the fact that they had already paid for tickets home. Four gave no figure for the extra payment; one said she paid \$50. Otherwise, the payments were:

Amount paid	Number paying	Amount paid	Number paying
Rp.10.000 (US\$0.86)	1	Rp.300.000 (US\$25.8)	3
Rp.50.000 or less (US\$4.3)	4	Rp.400.000 (US\$34.4)	1
Rp.100,000 (US\$8.6)	5	Rp.750.000 (US\$64.5)	1
Rp.200.000 (US\$17.2)	2		

When added to the sums paid for tickets, with the responses from interviewees who did not provide figures for both the above questions omitted, the impact on total transport costs is clear:

Place of Origin Amount Paid	East Java	Central Java	West Java (in- cluding Jakarta)	Sumatera
Nothing			1	
Rp.50.000 or less (US\$4.3)		1		
Rp.100.000 (US\$8.6)				
Rp.200.000 (US\$17.2)	1			
Rp.300.000 (US\$25.8)	1			
Rp.400.000 (US\$34.4)	1	2		1
Rp.500.000 (US\$43)				1
Rp.750.000 (US\$64.5)	1		2	
Rp.1.000.000 (US\$86)		1	2	
Rp.1.500.000 (US\$129)			2	
Rp.2.000.000 (US\$172)			1	

Three women paid more to the drivers than they did for the original tickets. One woman said that her payment was to the ‘driver’s helper’ and another to the driver and his two friends.

Choices?

Asked if they had ever deliberately avoided going to Terminal Three, 18 women said ‘Yes’ and 12 said ‘No’, but when asked how they had done so, 26 said that they had taken a ‘plane to another Indonesian airport. One said she had not gone back. Of the three remaining answers, two suggested that the interviewees found the question confusing, and this perhaps explains the inconsistency in the answers to the two questions.

One interviewee had a strategy for avoiding the terminal: *“By not being together with other domestic workers, but making friends with students who study abroad – for example, or with people who are coming back from their holidays abroad, so that we leave the airport together.”*

There was no uncertainty over the following question. When asked if they had a choice between going through Terminal Three and not doing so, six said they would choose Terminal Three (though one said, ‘Because no choice’ and another hadn’t been through the airport since 2000) and 32 said they would not.

There were a variety of views on whether Terminal Three provided protection for workers or not, with both ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ responses being qualified to some extent. 15 women said that it did provide protection, with seven giving answers that referred to safety issues.

One woman said, *“Because when someone tried to ask money from me, security women tried to protect me and tell me not to care and avoid the man.”* Another said that the terminal gave her protection against being threatened and asked to pay money.

20 women replied negatively. Three said that it wasn’t safe; five complained of how individuals there tried to get money from them. One said, *“Because there are still lots of recruiters, who force us to give money, even the police - also for safety reasons or others”*. Another said, *“Their plan is to threaten us, especially FDWs⁸, because they know we have a lot of money. They don’t know that we have a lot of money because of our hard work!”*

Interviewees think that there is a need for returning domestic workers to be protected. 58 said so; only two said that there was not. When those who said ‘Yes’ were asked what services for protection they thought were needed, 37 wanted safety, 18 of them specifically referring to protection on their way home. They evidently had in mind both physical safety and protection against those who seek to part them from their earnings. Some refer to people cheating and robbing them, and being cruel. The interviewee who said she wanted *“To be safe until arriving home, without paying extra fees”*, summarised a generally held view.

A second notable current was an assertion of rights and dignity. Five wanted respect for their human rights; one woman talked of *‘human rights as workers’*, and another said, *“Human rights must stand tall.”* On the theme of dignity, one interviewee, expressed a wish *“To be treated like a human being and not an animal,”* while another asked for *“The same respect/regard, even if we are only workers.”* *“Don’t treat domestic workers differently from other people – treat them equally,”* said one woman.

Some women responded with specific proposals for services for protection of domestic workers:

- Good taxi services; one woman specifically mentioned workers who took taxis being cheated by drivers who did not set their meters at the start of journeys.

⁸ ‘Foreign Domestic Workers - the interviewee’s own choice of words –though Indonesians returning home would not be foreigners in their own land.

-Workers should be given money to pay for their fare home.

-“An institution which attends to Foreign Domestic Workers, who are less clever in meeting the situation, but which doesn’t treat us as objects.”

When asked whether they had personal experience or knew of other women who had been victimised in Terminal Three, 43 women said that they had. 24 described themselves or friends as being forced to pay money, harassed for money, or ‘cheated’, either in the terminal or on the way home. Among the more detailed testimonies are:

- “When my mother died, I went through Terminal 3 and I paid Rp. 250.000 (US\$21.5) and also another amount of money. So everytime I ask for help I must pay and the money is shared by the officials.”

- “My own experience, so many other people also had trouble, were asked to pay money, threatened, treated inhumanly and they didn’t care if we asked for help.”

- “This is the story of one of my friends and also of my cousin. When she was in Terminal 3, she had to queue for hours. She reached there around 12pm but could only leave at 1am, even though she had already paid a man who wore police uniform so that she’d be able to come out quickly. There were illegal workers offering to carry luggage and they forced them (to let them do it) although they didn’t want it and then they asked to be paid although they had carried the luggage for a little while only.”

- “Yes my friend has been to Terminal 3 and paid her fee, but on her journey she was asked for more, which was a greater amount than the travel fee and she was threatened with being dropped off in the middle of the jungle.”

- “When my friend arrived at Terminal 3 she had already paid Rp. 500.000 (US\$43) for the travel cost, but after she reached home the driver asked her to add Rp.500.000 more.”

Some women gave no specific information, but made comments:

- “I always hear (about) cruelty (and) hardness in Terminal 3.”

-“Ya some (of) the domestic say not money but they don’t believe, then they force to give some money.”

-“I myself got threatened and harassed. They treated me inhumanly in Terminal 3.”

In Singapore

Migrant domestic workers generally have no money to send back to their families or save for themselves during the early months of their employment. They arrive with a burden of debt resulting from the various fees charged to them by recruiters, agencies and official bodies. To that are added charges made by the agency that places them. It has become common practice for local agencies in Singapore to pay the total amount of accumulated debt to their Indonesian partner agencies and then recover that amount, plus their own charges, from Singapore employers. This is normally termed a ‘loan’ and is paid by monthly instalments by the employer, who deducts the money from the workers’ salaries until it has all been recovered.⁹ Over the years, these fees and charges have tended to grow, without a compensating rise in salary levels.

The final part of the survey was designed to shed more light on this situation. Interviewees were first asked whether they had paid anything to their agency in Indonesia, before leaving. The great majority had paid nothing, or had only paid small sums; it is a deficiency of the questionnaire that it does not allow us to distinguish these two groups from each other in order to discover how many women paid nothing to the agency before leaving.

Less than Rp. 100.000 (US\$8.6) or free	Rp. 100.001– Rp. 500.000 (US\$43)	Rp. 500.001– Rp. 1.000.000 (US\$86)	Rp. 1.000.001– Rp. 1.500.000 (US\$129)	Rp. 1.500.000– Rp. 2.000.000 (US\$172)	More than Rp. 2.000.000 (US\$172)	No answer
67	9	2	3	2	1	1

⁹ The practice is described in greater detail in a 2003 TWC2 research paper, ‘Unregulated business: How foreign domestic workers are recruited, trained and deployed in Singapore homes’ (Tan Hui Yee, Puvaneswari Sundaram, Liew Kai Khiun, with acknowledgements to Mandy Heng and Ng Wei Chian). This is available in the library section of the TWC2 website <www.twc2.org.sg>. ‘Loan’ is a misleading term, as the agencies do not lend any money to the employers.

The next point that needed to be established was how long the women had worked in Singapore, as this could make a difference to how long it took them to repay their debt, and how much they were ultimately able to benefit financially from their employment.

1999 and before	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
25	10	10	11	6	9	11	9	3	5

13 of the women who arrived in 1999 or earlier gave the year of their arrival. Most came in the mid-1990s, but two arrived in 1990, and one in 1987.

Workers were asked, “How much was the loan repayment (salary deduction) in Singapore?” Answers were collated by amount and by the years of the women’s arrival. Some women gave figures for their repayment period, but the great majority indicated the duration of their repayments. Some gave both. The chart below is based on 79 answers indicating the duration of the repayment period.

Date of arrival Repayment period	1999 or before	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
None	3									
3 months	4									
4 months	4	2								
5 months		2								
6 months	3	3	7	4	3	1	1			
7 months	3	1	3	5	2	5	3	2		1
8 months						2	2	5	1	3
9 months							1		2	1

One answer from 2000 (not included above), was unusual in that the worker said that she had only paid one month’s salary deduction, but a check against earlier answers revealed that she had paid more than Rp. 2.000.000 (US\$172) to her agency before leaving Indonesia, so that she arrived in Singapore with little debt.

The trend is very obvious: workers who experienced no repayment and low repayment periods are concentrated among those who arrived in 1999 or before, and the tendency as the years of commencing work approach the present is for the repayment period to grow. All workers recruited in the past three years faced from seven to nine months of salary repayment.

42 workers supplied some information on the money they paid out; 29 of them detailed their payments. This information supports the above conclusions. A worker who came in 1994 had to repay a total of S\$600¹⁰; one who came in 1996 paid S\$700; one who arrived in 1997 paid S\$600; another S\$800. Repayment amounts thereafter drift upwards, but salaries remain stuck around the S\$240-S\$260 level until 2005, when they increase, but fail to keep up with the growth in debt levels. Of women who gave financial details, one who arrived in 2006 had to repay S\$2,080, and did so at a rate of S\$260 a month, from a salary of S\$280 a month; a woman who arrived in 2007 repaid S\$2,400 at a rate of S\$300 a month, while another repaid S\$3,150 over 9 months. Two women who arrived in 2008 gave figures: one repaid S\$2,480, at a rate of S\$310 a month out of a salary of S\$320 and the other said that she had S\$330 taken from her every month (*“took whole salary”*) for eight months, which would come to S\$2640.

The workers were asked who paid the recruitment costs of the domestic worker (although the answers to the previous question would seem to have made this one rather superfluous). 14 said “The worker herself”; 74 said that the employer paid for the worker and then took the money back from her salary; nine answered that their employers paid for them and did not take money back, but in two cases, that seemed to contradict the evidence of their previous statement, which suggested they belong with the 74.

The last two questions in the survey concerned the current salary levels of workers and their starting salaries. It is to be expected that there would be little or no difference among recent arrivals, but given trends and standards in other professions, it might also be assumed that those who had been working here longer would have seen significant increases in their salaries.

Salary received for the current contract

Less than S\$200	S\$201 - 250	S\$251 - 300	S\$301 - 350	S\$351 -400	S\$401 - 450	S\$451 - 500	S\$501 - \$550
4	6	16	30	12	11	8	3

¹⁰ The Singapore dollar-US dollar exchange rate was S\$1 = US\$0.6591 on 14 November 2008, the first day of the survey.

Salary received for the first contract

Less than S\$200	S\$201 - 250	S\$251 - 300	S\$301 - 350	S\$351 -400	S\$401 - 450	S\$451 - 500	S\$501 - 550
3	60	23	4	1	0	0	1

For the interviewees collectively, there has plainly been an upward movement overall in salary levels. Significantly over half of interviewees began working on a monthly salary of under S\$250, but the great majority are paid somewhat more at present. To gain some indication of how much of this rise in salary levels resulted from additional payments for length of service and employer satisfaction with the workers and how much might reflect an upward movement in Indonesian domestic workers' salaries more generally, further comparisons were undertaken:

Starting and current salaries (per month) according to arrival year (vacant rows omitted for reasons of space):

Arrived in 1999 or earlier	Pay: First contract Present contract	Less than S\$200	S\$ 201- 250	S\$ 251- 300	S\$ 301- 350	S\$ 351- 400	S\$ 401- 450	S\$ 451- 500	Over S\$501
	S\$201-\$250		2						
	S\$301-S\$350		3						
	S\$351-S\$400		7	1					
	S\$401-S\$450		2						1
	S\$451-S\$500	1	5						
	S\$501-S\$550		2	1					

Arrived in 2000	Pay: First contract Present contract	Less than S\$200	S\$ 201- 250	S\$ 251- 300	S\$ 301- 350	S\$ 351- 400	S\$ 401- 450	S\$ 451- 500	S\$ 501- 550
	S\$201-\$250		2						
	S\$251-S\$300			1					
	S\$301-S\$350		1						
	S\$351-S\$400		3			1			
	S\$401-S\$450		1	1					

Arrived in 2001	Pay: contract Present contract	First Less than S\$200	S\$ 201 - 250	S\$ 251- 300	S\$ 301- 350	S\$ 351- 400	S\$ 401- 450	S\$ 451- 500	S\$ 501- 550
	S\$251-S\$300	1	1	1					
	S\$301-S\$350		3						
	S\$351-S\$400		3						
	S\$450-S\$500		1						

Arrived in 2002	Pay: contract Present contract	First Less than S\$200	S\$ 201- 250	S\$ 251- 300	S\$ 301- 350	S\$ 351- 400	S\$ 401- 450	S\$ 451- 500	S\$ 501- 550
	S\$201-S\$250		1						
	S\$251-S\$300		1						
	S\$301-S\$350		2	1	1				
	S\$351-S\$400		1						
	S\$401-S\$450		1						
	S\$501-S\$550		1						

Arrived in 2003	Pay: contract Present contract	First Less than S\$200	S\$ 201- 250	S\$ 251- 300	S\$ 301- 350	S\$ 351- 400	S\$ 401- 450	S\$ 451- 500	S\$ 501- 550
	S\$201-\$250		2						
	S\$251-S\$300			1					
	S\$351-S\$400			1					
	S\$401-S\$450		2						

Arrived in 2004	Pay: contract Present contract	First Less than S\$200	S\$ 201 - 250	S\$ 251- 300	S\$ 301- 350	S\$ 351- 400	S\$ 401- 450	S\$ 451- 500	S\$ 501- 550
	S\$251-S\$300		2						
	S\$301-S\$350		4	1					
	S\$351-S\$400		1						
	S\$401-S\$450				1				

Arrived in 2005	Pay: contract Present contract	First Less than S\$200	S\$ 201- 250	S\$ 251- 300	S\$ 301- 350	S\$ 351- 400	S\$ 401- 450	S\$ 451- 500	S\$ 501- 550
	S\$251-S\$300		1	2					
	S\$301-S\$350		1	3					
	S\$351-S\$400		2	2					

Arrived in 2006	Pay: First contract Present contract	Less than S\$200	S\$ 201-250	S\$ 251-300	S\$ 301-350	S\$ 351-400	S\$ 401-450	S\$ 451-500	S\$ 501-550
	Less than S\$200	1							
	S\$251-S\$300		1	3					
	S\$301-S\$350		1	1	1				
	S\$351-S\$400			1					
	S\$451-S\$500							1	

Arrived in 2007 - 2008	Pay: First contract Present contract	Less than S\$200	S\$ 201-250	S\$ 251-300	S\$ 301-350	S\$ 351-400	S\$ 401-450	S\$ 451-500	S\$ 501-550
	S\$251-S\$300			1					
	S\$301-S\$350			1	6				

The interviewees who arrived in Singapore in 2007-2008 would almost certainly still be on their first contract.

It can be seen clearly that many long-term workers have had a significant percentage increase in their salaries, but from a very low starting level. Some have seen their salaries rise little, while a few have been unfortunate enough to have them remain unchanged or even fall.

The customary starting level for salaries has clearly increased somewhat in the past few years, from a norm of around \$250 in the first half of the present decade to around \$300 currently. Workers can generally expect to have an increase in pay after their first year or two in Singapore, but the maximum most can hope to earn per month even after years of work remains low.

Conclusions

The survey findings set forth above largely speak for themselves.

The process of recruitment of migrant workers worldwide often involves families and potential workers being told exaggerated tales of the money they could earn. It is only as a worker goes through the stages that lead to placement abroad that she discovers the truth about what she has taken on. There should be much more

transparency from the outset about the costs a worker may be expected to pay, so that she can make an informed choice about working abroad. Recruiters, with a personal stake in sending workers abroad, cannot be relied upon to tell potential workers the truth; home governments should publicise legitimate costs and warn against illegitimate practices; in Indonesia, this sometimes includes recruiters giving money to women's families to make them readier for them to go to work overseas.

The record of the agencies emerges as mixed: according to the women interviewed, the training centres did a good job of training and the agencies provided accommodation that the women found basically satisfactory. On the more negative side, some seem to have imposed restrictions on the freedom of movement and communication of the trainees that are inappropriate both to their status as women and as workers. Furthermore, it would seem that more needs to be done to brief women on their rights and how to protect themselves as well as possible against harm and exploitation.

In contrast, there is hardly any positive element in the interviewees' descriptions of Terminal Three. It emerges as a place of intimidation and cheating, where all too often, money that returning workers spent long hours earning is shamelessly plundered. The process even continues on the way home, in buses and taxis used by the women. Far from ensuring security and a friendly welcome for the returning workers, many official personnel of various kinds are involved in the dishonest practices at and around the terminal. Staff should be required to act like public servants and no form of extortion of money from the workers should be tolerated. The unscrupulous characters who wait around to take advantage of the women should be excluded from the terminal and its vicinity, and it should be made easier for the women's families to meet them.

The benefit derived from working in Singapore has been eroded by increases in fees and charges, largely collected by recruiters and agents in Indonesia, although agency charges have risen in Singapore too. In the early years of foreign domestic worker recruitment, it was normal for employers to pay their workers' costs in coming to Singapore, and the experiences of a few of the veteran workers interviewed during this survey are a reminder of those

times. Over time, the expenses grew and employers became more reluctant to pay them, so when some Singapore agencies began to advertise the '\$0 maid' or the '\$88 maid', many employers took the chance to pay less themselves, and the cost of coming to Singapore was increasingly borne by the workers.¹¹ As the survey strikingly confirms, it is now normal for a newly arrived worker to have to part with almost all of her salary for eight or nine months to repay debt.

This is not due to increased charges alone. While starting pay levels have improved in Singapore, this was from a low starting point, and there is quite a disparity in the additional pay that different workers gain through years of service. Some do well; a few see no improvement at all. Much depends on the attitudes of individual employers. Salary increases have not kept up with the costs of coming to Singapore: Indonesian women are paying out an increasing proportion of their earnings in order to be able to earn. It is hard to see how this can change while Singapore's government insists that pay levels are to be left to market forces and there is an apparently unending supply of disempowered young women from less developed countries whose governments value the money they remit home.

A significant improvement in the conditions of recruitment and employment of Indonesian domestic workers and the securing for them of a better economic outcome for all their sacrifices requires action in their home country and in destination countries such as Singapore. The preferred choice should be for everyone to be able to find work in her home country, but the second best should be for those workers who leave their families and homeland behind to earn a better living to obtain the fullest benefit possible from it.

¹¹ The transition from employers paying the placement costs to the burden of payment being transferred to the workers is reported in '\$1 for a maid' offer criticised', (Chin Soo Fang, 'Straits Times', 3 August 1998)

Recommendations

To the Government of Indonesia:

1). Ensure that citizens considering going to work abroad are given the fullest possible information about what costs they may legitimately be expected to bear, including precise details of charges made by official bodies and approximations for the charges that agencies are legally entitled to make and that constitute 'standard practice'. The information should be made available through an official website and local government offices.

2). Likewise, notices of charges that workers may be expected to pay upon their return, including rates for transport, should be publicised through an official website, and prominently displayed at points of entry.

3). Training centres should be required to give greater attention to providing information on the conditions that workers will face in the destination country and how to cope with them. There should be instruction on their rights and how to defend them. The right of trainee domestic workers to communicate freely with their families should be firmly asserted.

4). Returning domestic workers coming to Jakarta's Sukarno-Hatta International Airport should not be obliged to exit through Terminal 3. Relatives who wish to meet them there should be permitted to do so. Soliciting of unofficial and additional payments should be firmly prohibited and punished.

To the Government of Singapore:

1). Require employment agencies to supply all worker clients with a statement of their charges, which will include those carried over from the Indonesian partner agencies and those made by the Singapore agencies or official bodies. Combined with the measures recommended to the Indonesian government, this will help bring transparency to the recruitment process and help to counter excessive charges to workers.

2). Employers should be required to pay the recruitment costs of the domestic workers they hire and be strictly prohibited from recovering the money from the workers through salary deductions. Workers would then be paid their salaries in full from the first month of their employment.