



Transient Workers Count Too
DIGNITY OVERDUE

NEWSLETTER

WEEKLY
DAY OFF
FOR ALL

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Editorial:

Population Growth and Migrants

The White Paper on Population drew a lot of critical fire and was the subject of a week-long discussion in Parliament. The issues it raised touched a raw nerve in many Singaporeans. The most sensitive point was the suggestion that Singapore's population might rise to 6.9 million by 2030 – a figure that the government hastened to say was a 'worst case' scenario.

Public concern focused partly on the number of people projected to live in this small island state, but also on who those people would be. Would professionals recruited from abroad keep Singaporeans out of top posts? Would an influx of migrant workers depress pay for workers on the lower salary levels and create unfair competition for jobs?

TWC2's members probably have quite a range of views on the population issue, and we don't wish to comment on the broader questions involved, but we do believe that it is appropriate to speak out on the future status of migrant workers here. We are not advocates of an expansion or reduction of migrant worker numbers, but of respect for the rights and wellbeing of the workers who do come. That said, there are at least some ways in which the migrant worker force already here could be employed more productively to the benefit of Singapore and the workers themselves.

Moving away from a pattern of employment that encourages short term employment for low pay to one that incentivizes migrant workers to stay for longer and apply the skills developed here within Singapore would boost productivity without adding a single new worker. This requires clamping down on the kickbacks in some sectors that make hiring a new worker more attractive than retaining an existing one, and raising pay levels – a minimum wage would help! Well-established workers would perform better as teams, another factor promoting productivity. Employers should not be able to repatriate existing employees and replace them with new ones without a very good reason: if the reason is bankruptcy or reduced need for workers, then those workers concerned should be able to seek jobs with other employers in Singapore, which would save them having to shell out thousands of dollars to meet the costs of going abroad to work all over again – and Singapore would gain by having workers stay on who had training and experience and had adapted to local social norms conducive to better relations with Singaporeans.

Then there's the issue of workers who could be productively employed but who are not. An increasing number of men who are waiting for cases to be settled qualify for employment under the MOM's Temporary Job Scheme, but there is a shortage of employers willing to take them on.

(Continued on Page Two)

TWC2 AGM: 2013

TWC2's 2013 Annual General Meeting will take place on Sunday, March 24th, from 2-5pm in a room at the Singapore Council Of Women's Organisations (SCWO), 96, Waterloo Street. Nearest MRT: Bras Basah (CC2)

All members are welcome to attend. To take part and vote, you need to have your membership up to date (\$10.00 a year, \$2.00 for migrant workers). Please renew now unless you have joined since October 2012.

This meeting will include elections to the TWC2 committee.

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Editorial: Singapore's Future Population and Migrant Workers

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Some see them as 'troublemakers' because they had a dispute with their previous employer, and would rather take on a new worker from abroad. TWC2 sees men who have been injured and wait months on end for their cases to be settled. Those whose injuries are less serious and don't prevent them from working should be eligible for employment while they await case settlement: it's what they want and need, in the absence of sick pay, and they could fill gaps in the job market.

We have handled a series of cases involving workers who were brought into Singapore by sub-contracting companies on the promise of full time, decently paid work, and who then find themselves waiting around for work that never comes. They have paid \$8,000-\$10,000 to middlemen to come to Singapore, and end up being sent home having made little or nothing. They were eager to work, but tell TWC2 that they believe that the money they paid was shared between recruiters in their home country and their 'employers' here, and that this was the intention all along. In cases like this, unscrupulous employers were able to obtain In Principle Approvals (IPAs) for men to come to fill vacancies that did not exist, while other employers cried out for workers they could not obtain. MOM has tightened up on the release of IPAs in the past few years, and as legitimate businesses complain about the restrictions, they might pause to consider the rogues who cast doubt on others' worker needs by their own dubious practices.

Domestic workers who have escaped abusive employers or who have outstanding claims for non-payment of salary should, as a matter of course, be allowed to work while waiting for their cases to be settled, rather than living in shelters without an income for months on end.

Each of these propositions is a 'win-win' one for Singapore as a whole and for migrant workers. What's stopping them from being implemented?

Events

January 8th: *Troubled waters: trafficking of Filipino fishermen into the long haul fishing industry through Singapore*, a report by Dr Sallie Yea, with contributions by Shelley Thio, was launched. The launch was reported in 'Today' and 'Straits Times', but neither article drew on the testimony of the trafficked men that was presented in the report.

The report tells of how men from a wide variety of backgrounds were recruited on the promise of decent pay, with no deductions and with fair conditions (such as reasonable hours of rest and rest during illness), but found themselves trapped on Taiwanese fishing boats where they were forced to work for long hours, with no extra pay for overtime. Instead of being paid monthly, they were told that their money would be held for them, after deductions were made for their placement fees (normally four months). Salary deductions were made for 'accommodation'. The report reproduces a payment voucher for a worker who was promised US\$400 a month when recruited, but only paid US\$160 a month according to the voucher given him when he docked in Singapore. Because of deductions made by his employer, after 13 months of hard work, he owed his employer US\$83.

Even more appalling are the work conditions: men working without life jackets, because there are none, suffering injuries that are poorly treated (boats don't put into port to hospitalise an injured man), being given rotten food and subjected to beating and verbal abuse.

The cases came to light in Singapore because the boats docked here and some men then escaped from the vessels or terminated their employment on them. Singaporean manning agencies undertake work for the owners of these vessels.

To read the full report, please see: http://twc2.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Troubled_waters_sallie_yea.pdf

January 10th: TWC2 submitted its proposals on the amendment of the Employment Act to the Ministry of Manpower.

New Help Leaflets

The latest edition of TWC2's help leaflet is out. It has been fully revised and updated. There are three versions now available: English, Chinese and Bahasa Indonesia, and soon there will also be Tamil and Bangla versions. Each non-English version has been adapted for the workers it is aimed out, to leave out information that would not be useful to them, so making the text less dense than in previous editions. Now we need to get them used. If you can take any of these pocket-sized leaflets to distribute to workers, please contact the TWC2 office and order some.

Two Anniversaries

There are two significant anniversaries for TWC2 in March. On 9th, it will be ten years since our forerunner group, The Working Committee Two, was launched. We mark that anniversary in this newsletter by looking at issues TWC2 has taken up in the past ten years and changes, mostly in areas of policy and regulation, that have been introduced over that time.

On 18th March 2008, the first meals provided by the Cuff Road Project were served to destitute migrant workers. We thought that we'd keep it going for as long as we could: five years and over 360,000 meals later, it is still going. Project Coordinator, Debbie Fordyce, reflects on the project below. Two new articles on the TWC2 website give more information about the project:

<http://twc2.org.sg/2013/02/16/cuff-road-project-2012-statistics/>

<http://twc2.org.sg/2013/02/16/who-eats-with-the-cuff-road-project-and-why/>

Looking Back on Five Years of the Cuff Road Project

When the project first started in March 2008, I had no idea what we were getting involved in. None of us were familiar with the problems that bedevil the male workers, let alone what we might do about it. We didn't ask much of the participants at the start, and they didn't share much with us.

What opened my eyes to a host of problems was when I agreed to invite Boominathan into my home. His leg had been crushed by a forklift, and became badly infected one year and several operations later. He could barely walk, the leg looked as if it might have to be amputated, but doctors packed him with antibiotics and he pulled through. Boomi was a delightful houseguest and remains a friend even now almost five years later.

The next man who caught our attention was Sekar Ravi, a man in his 50's with badly infected feet. He had been living on the streets for over three years while MOM conducted an investigation into a company's illegal deployment of him. That's when we realized that a large number were being held as prosecuting witnesses against employers, but receiving no support while their cases dragged on.

New problems emerged when we included the Bangladeshi workers in the project in August 2008. We met men by the scores, and by the hundreds, who were brought to Singapore for the fees that they paid to agents and employers. They were held for months without work, repatriated, and replaced by new men. Their most common complaint was "no work no pay", which hardly expresses the hardship and impoverishment they and their families suffered as a result of coming to Singapore.

These problems persist even as MOM works to tighten regulations to prevent them. The need to grow Singapore's economy continues to deflect efforts to ensure safe and dignified work for transient migrants. As the levies increase for unskilled workers, employers hire skilled workers to do the same jobs. As men from other countries scramble for employment here, costs are transferred to the worker. Employers continue to benefit from Singapore being seen as an attractive destination for migrant workers, without accepting their individual responsibility to abide by regulations.

The Cuff Road Project serves the basic needs of providing food for men who've been failed by the system, and gives us better insight into how the problems could be remedied. On a personal level we meet men with a wide variety of problems and coping mechanisms. While men usually have to accept that the outcome of their claim may not be satisfactory, they are comforted to meet people who listen and work to find solutions.

I'm pleased at the number of volunteers, students doing project work, charitable groups, journalists and researchers that the project attracts. They have access to the men who are willing to share their stories and insight. We've benefitted from the work of individuals and groups who get involved in migrant issues and explore the issues from different angles. While we're not pleased to say that the project has grown to where we now have about 200 new men each month registering with the project, although the increase in numbers is probably more a result of awareness of the project rather than of more men with injuries and salary complaints.

All of us who are involved as volunteers with the Cuff Road Project benefit in our growing understanding of the social, economic and policy issues that create these difficulties. Just as important is that we're able to see the problems from the personal perspective of the men themselves who benefit in small ways from our efforts. Five years since the start of the food project, I'm happy to continue as long as the need exists.

Debbie Fordyce

Advocacy and Domestic Workers: Ten Years On

Transient Workers Count Too's forerunner group, The Working Committee Two, was launched ten years ago on March 9th, 2003. There were 140,000 domestic workers in the country then, there are now over 210,000. The new group worked solely on domestic worker issues. TWC2 as it now exists was set up as a society in 2004 to work for the rights and wellbeing of all low paid migrant workers. It took up the issues raised by its predecessor, and more besides. We believe that ten years of advocacy, research, public education and practical assistance has played a part in making a difference for domestic workers.

A Weekly Day Off

The call for a weekly day off for domestic workers was made in a founding research paper of The Working Committee Two on 'Support Systems for Foreign Domestic Workers'. It pointed out that, although there was quite a range of possible sources of help for domestic workers who had problems with their employers, it would be hard for those who did not have days off to make use of them. The struggle to win the basic right to a weekly day off for domestic workers became TWC2's longest running campaign, with activities and initiatives every year, either our own or organised with partners (*See the TWC2 Newsletter, March-April 2012 for details*).

In 2006, a new standard contract drafted by the employment agencies' accreditation bodies was introduced, with a day off clause, but it was not binding and allowed a worker to be paid in lieu of having a day off. As TWC2 predicted out at the time, it made hardly any practical difference to the pre-existing situation of around 50 per cent of domestic workers having no day off.

In 2010, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) introduced new work permit conditions stating that only half of the \$5000 security bond may be forfeited if a domestic worker absconds but her employer makes reasonable efforts to find her. They removed employers' liability to lose the bond if a domestic worker violates her work permit conditions by marrying a local or becoming pregnant, providing that the employer has informed her of her work permit obligations and notifies MOM of the violations. Fear of losing the security bond if a worker runs away or becomes pregnant were two of the main justifications offered by employers for not letting domestic workers have a day off. These measures effectively removed any real basis for those arguments.

In March 2012, MOM announced the introduction of a mandatory weekly day-off for domestic workers as of January 1st, 2013, but with the option of employers compensating workers between S\$17.50 and S\$20 for each day off given up. The new rule would not apply to existing contracts – only when they came up for renewal. Despite these 'get out' provisions for unrelenting 'no day off' employers, this was a big step forward: at the very least, it signalled official backing for the principle of a weekly day off and put domestic workers in a stronger long term position to call for a day off. It should contribute to changing mindsets and making giving domestic workers a weekly day off the social norm.

Abuse

TWC2 has argued for a variety of measures to counter abuse - first and foremost, introducing a mandatory day off. We have urged that agencies and MOM carry out checks in the months after a worker has been newly placed with an employer to see that she is being treated properly. In 2006, MOM introduced random interviews for domestic workers during their first months of employment. When work permit conditions were amended in 2011, terms of what constituted prohibited 'ill treatment' of workers were spelt out. At least as important in countering abuse has been a change in public attitudes: physical abuse of domestic workers is strongly condemned and is not regarded as something private that happens in an employer's home and that should not concern anyone else. Despite such changes, there seems to be a persistent level of abuse cases each year numbering between 50 and 70: we remain convinced that a mandatory day off is vital to cutting this down further.

Money Matters

Domestic workers were the lowest paid workers in Singapore in 2003 and still are in 2013, though pay rates have risen from around \$200-\$320 a month to around \$450 a month now. From the start, TWC2 highlighted practices that eat into and erode even these low levels of payment. These include the extraction of high placement costs, which used to be paid by employers, but, since the late 1990s, have generally been advanced by employers and then deducted from their employees' salaries; also, arbitrary deductions from pay and late or non-payment of salaries. The issues were summarised in our September 2006 research report, '*Debt, Delays, Deductions*'.

In October 2004, an employer was fined \$15,075 for illegal employment and non-payment of salary. This was the first prosecution for non-payment of salary since foreign domestic workers began to be admitted to Singapore in 1987.

In November 2006, a new work permit condition stating that domestic workers can request that their salaries be paid into their Singapore bank accounts came into effect. This would help in case of later disputes over salary issues, by creating an independent record of payments.

In July 2008, a new work permit condition stated that it is an offence for employers to recover costs such as the levy, security bond, medical or repatriation expenses from domestic workers.

In January 2010, security bond conditions were amended to require employers to pay workers their salary promptly, within a week at most of the end of each month or any shorter salary period.

In April 2011, an amendment to the Employment Agencies Act said that an agency can only charge a worker the equivalent of one month's salary for a year's placement, up to a maximum of two years. TWC2 would have preferred a clear commitment to a maximum charge of one month's salary towards **all** placement costs – fees and charges for services included. Before this, in theory, domestic workers were only liable to pay one-tenth of one month's salary for their fee, but in practice, they were charged eight-nine months of their salary as of 2011. *(This is the only major condition of domestic worker employment in Singapore that has worsened in the past ten years: in 2003, placement costs came to six months' worth of workers' salaries.)*

Health

Ten years ago, employers had to take out personal accident insurance of not less than \$10,000 for their domestic workers and to take care of all other medical expenses not covered by this policy. TWC2 has urged higher and more comprehensive insurance cover, since compensation costs can be considerably higher than \$10,000 and hospitalisation expenses need to be covered at realistic levels of insurance, for the sake of both worker and employer.

In January 2008, compulsory medical insurance coverage of at least S\$5,000 a year for inpatient care and day surgery was introduced and the level of personal accident insurance coverage raised to minimum of S\$40,000, with compensation payable to the domestic worker or her beneficiaries. The minimum level of insurance for hospitalisation was raised to \$15,000 in 2010.

Safety at Heights

A small team of researchers in The Working Committee Two sifted through four years of media reports on domestic workers killed in falls from high buildings and obtained information from the Indonesian and Philippines' embassies. They found that around 90 domestic workers had been killed in falls over the previous four years. The overwhelming majority were Indonesians. These figures were shared with journalists and then the Indonesian embassy released its own figures and MOM confirmed that from 1999 until June 2003, 99 workers had died in falls, 89 of whom were Indonesians.

TWC2 has since brought up the issue from time to time, raising public awareness and making proposals for changes that could reduce the toll of deaths and injuries, which include empowering domestic workers to refuse to do dangerous tasks and guaranteeing their right to leave their work place freely.

In June 2003, a new work permit rule stated that if a domestic worker dies in a fall from a building, her employer must report it within 12 hours. From the following year, all new domestic workers had to attend a safety awareness course conducted in their own language. MOM has distributed printed safety information to workers periodically since then.

In February 2006, for the first time, an employer was jailed for telling her worker to climb out on a ledge to hang out washing, as a result of which the worker fell to her death.

Responding to public concern over a series of recent deaths from falls, in June 2012, MOM ruled that domestic workers are not allowed to clean window exteriors unless supervised by their employer or an adult representative and in any case, there must be safety grilles in place and locked during cleaning. Employment agencies were required to facilitate the signing of a safety agreement between employers and domestic workers employed from 1 December 2012, particularly concerning cleaning of window exteriors.

Increased public sensitivity about the issue and a series of practical measures brought a reduction in the number of fatal falls from 99 from 1999-June 2003 to 24 in 2006-2010.

Other Issues

In 2003, we were among those who raised their voices against agencies that put domestic workers on display in their premises, like commodities for sale. In September that year, MOM warned agencies against this practice.

Over the years, TWC2 encountered cases of employers choosing to interpret their obligation to pay for their workers' return home as sending her to the closest part of her homeland to Singapore: essentially, this meant sending Indonesian domestic workers to Batam. We raised this issue in dialogue with MOM. Amended work permit conditions in 2011 made it clear that the obligation to pay for a worker's return home meant paying for her journey to the nearest point of entry to her home.

The mandatory English language test for would-be domestic workers introduced in 2005 brought complaints from agencies, employers and workers. TWC2 said that the key issue was that domestic workers should be able to communicate effectively with their employers and make use of information sent to them or seen on signs when they went out, so that, for example, knowledge of Tamil, Mandarin and Bahasa Indonesia should also be considered, depending on who would employ a worker. Following the suicide of Indonesian worker, Sulastri Wardyoyo in 2011, the MOM scrapped the English test and replaced it with a mandatory one day settling in programme.

TWC2 has raised the issue of employers who go through a number of workers within a short space of time and return them to agencies or send them home. Often, the problem lies in unreasonable demands by employers, as well as poor matching by some agencies. This year, MOM tightened rules concerning such changes: anyone making more than four in a year would have to undergo assessment interviews before any further work permit application is approved.

For the Future....

*Placement costs must be cut: it will take cooperation between Singapore and the governments of home countries. Migrant workers who come via the agency route appear to be being charged what it is believed that 'the market' will bear, rather than a reasonable percentage mark-up on actual services provided. The difficulty of sorting out what charges may be legitimate or not is compounded by the reluctance of agencies to provide a full breakdown of what their charges consist of. A Filipina domestic worker should pay no more than three months salary deductions, if the cap on fees imposed by the Philippines government (one month) and Singapore's government (two months for two years) is strictly applied, but workers still routinely face eight or more months of salary deductions.

*A mandatory weekly day off should mean what it says. At the very least, there should be a guaranteed minimum number of days off every year that cannot be given up on any terms, to protect domestic workers against pressure to surrender all their days off. This should mean a minimum of two days off every month, and amount to no less than 26 days a year.

*It should be impermissible for an employer to interfere with a domestic worker's freedom of movement, communication, with her personal life or her control of her own personal documents, including her passport and her work permit. As long as she does the job she was hired for, it is up to her who her friends are and how she spends her spare time – which she must have in the first place.

*Workers should be protected against arbitrary dismissal and being sent home for no good reason. Employers should have to provide a reason for wishing to terminate a worker's employment and she should be able to present her side of the story. Transfer should be made easier by MOM having the power to waive the requirement for a worker to obtain a letter of release from an existing employer if that employer does not offer a strong and valid reason for refusing to provide one. In the longer run, a more open employment system should be introduced and the practice of tying a worker to a specific employer should cease.

*Salaries should be paid into bank accounts.

*Employers should be advised on the full range of insurance policies available, so that they are better informed about comprehensive policies that can cover treatment of workers for pre-existing conditions, and accidents or illnesses that cost more to treat than the present minimum insurance. Agencies should be encouraged to give this advice, not simply suggest the cheapest policy.

New TWC2 Anti-discrimination T-shirts

TWC2 has launched T-shirts carrying messages opposing discrimination against migrant domestic workers. Consisting of three designs, the T-shirts highlight three actions that have become entrenched in Singapore and accepted as the norm. The first is the act of denying a domestic worker a day off to control her social life. The second is that of treating domestic workers as machines that should be made to work all the time without giving consideration to them as fellow human beings with emotions and aspirations. The last is the act of controlling the physical appearance of domestic workers by cutting their hair and ensuring that



they wear dowdy and unattractive clothes.

By labelling these actions as forms of discrimination, TWC2 wishes to highlight the unfair treatment to which domestic workers are subjected and to say that there should be zero tolerance for such actions in our society, as they strip domestic workers of their dignity. These actions reflect deep-seated prejudices against domestic workers that both motivate and excuse unfair treatment of domestic workers by employers and hinder changes that serve to acknowledge their full rights as workers. There are about 210,000 migrant domestic workers in Singapore. As of 1st January 2013, all new domestic workers will be entitled to a weekly day-off under the law. Yet, disturbingly, as an article published in *The Straits Times* on 4 December 2012 reported, many employers insist that their workers should work all week and be compensated by them with payment in lieu of a day off, as TWC2 predicted when it saw that the announcement of the mandatory day off decision in March 2012 permitted such a course of action. These employers feel that domestic workers should not be given a day off as it creates inconveniences and social problems, although these workers are grown women and no other group of workers in Singapore are subjected to such restrictions.

The artwork for the T-shirts is by Lim Yi Xiu, a graphic design graduate from Nanyang Technological University. (See below)

TWC2 provided the text that goes along with the artwork for the T-Shirt to emphasise the anti-discrimination message. The T-shirts are available in various sizes and can be purchased from TWC2's office at \$15.

(From TWC2 Media Release, 25th January 2013)

'We're Not So Different After All' – The Story Behind the T-shirts

'We are not so different after all' – This powerful message not only influenced the artwork that is now printed on the TWC2 T-shirts but also acted as the grounding principle for designer Yi Xiu's Nanyang Technological University (NTU) final year project.

Yi Xiu is now based in Frankfurt and I spoke to her (via email) to find out more about the T-shirt designs and her motivation to focus her project on foreign domestic workers.

The plight of foreign domestic workers has always been close to Yi Xiu's heart. As a child, Yi Xiu's parents' work often required them to keep long hours and travel overseas. Thus, the responsibility of maintaining the household and taking care of the children fell onto the 'aunties' that Yi Xiu's parents hired.

Yi Xiu remembers that at one point, her parents had hired three helpers, one to do the household chores, one to care for her bed ridden grandmother and a third to look after Yi Xiu and her two brothers.

Yi Xiu fondly remembers being pampered by her 'aunties' and becoming very attached to them. I also sensed a tinge of regret in Yi Xiu's words as she informs me that she has since lost touch with all her 'aunties'.

I asked Yi Xiu to share a fond memory she has of her childhood with her aunties and she describes the following scene to me, "I remember a sunny afternoon, the air conditioning switched on and the radio blasting music. My Filipino Aunty Aida, Rita and her name I have forgotten. My favorite was Aunty Rita, my two brothers and I all had a favorite then."

Yi Xiu sent me a sketch (as shown below) illustrating this pure and simple childhood memory that she has kept close to her heart for so many years.



Being raised by foreign domestic workers meant that Yi Xiu had always been aware of how hardworking these women are. However, Yi Xiu only fully realised how under appreciated these women are during her yearlong stint overseas.

Faced with having to juggle daily chores and schoolwork, Yi Xiu found herself feeling handicapped and overwhelmed. It was at this point that Yi Xiu started wondering how mothers could handle work, children and daily chores. Yi Xiu then realized that many families (*her own included*) could not run without their 'aunties'.

It was now apparent to Yi Xiu how truly invisible and unappreciated these women are to our society and she made the decision to focus her project on them.

The basis of Yi Xiu's website, [icunow](http://icunow2012.wordpress.com/) (<http://icunow2012.wordpress.com/>) was formed after listening to many of her friends share their workplace complaints and frustrations.

Upon graduating and entering the workforce, many of Yi Xiu's friends shared tales of sexual harassment, job discrimination, lack of privacy and having their aspirations and dreams disrespected. Yi Xiu recognised that these were all problems that many foreign domestic workers had to suffer as well.

By drawing parallels to these issues, Yi Xiu hopes that Singaporeans will realise that foreign domestic workers are just like us and should be treated with the same amount of respect and concern we expect to receive.

While Yi Xiu was fortunate to meet like-minded individuals such as the people behind maidbyme.tumblr.com who inspired and supported her work, choosing to focus her project on the plight of foreign domestic workers was not always well received by Yi Xiu's peers.

Yi Xiu mentions to me that many of her friends still subscribe to the inaccurate belief that employers do not have any other responsibility to helpers because they are already 'getting them out of poverty' by providing them with the job.

Perhaps her own worst critic, Yi Xiu reveals that she sometimes feels that she could have done more to create a larger impact. She shares that her own fears prevented her from delving into a documentary style project where could have she tracked down her long lost 'aunties' and thanked them personally.

Nonetheless, Yi Xiu's project and the artwork that she contributed for the creation of TWC2 's T-shirts drives home a very important message to our society – We should never forget that foreign domestic workers are just like us and deserve to be treated with nothing less than respect and love.

Nicolette Stewart

Looking Beyond the Border

As reported in the last TWC2 newsletter, 'Beyond the Border, Behind the Men' is an initiative launched by a group of young Singaporeans. They put on a successful photographic exhibition about Bangladeshi migrant workers at the Arts House from December 18th-2nd January. In the following article, they look back on their experiences leading up to the exhibition.

This is a reflection piece based on the time we spent in various parts of Bangladesh. We went there to collect stories, pictures and footage for Beyond the Border, Behind the Men. To produce a photo exhibition and short film documentary that would go beyond stale stereotypes of migrant workers in our midst and also to celebrate the human spirit that they and their families exhibit. Their reality here as a temporary low-waged worker is a precarious journey trying to navigate and steer away from injuries, salary arrears and simultaneously one confronted by discrimination and prejudice. We went over to catch a little glimpse into the lives of the men and their families and the struggles they confront and try to surmount in the migration journey.

We visited a total of 5 homes, each in various states of comfort and disrepair. In one, we lived in a concrete building not unlike a 2-room HDB flat in Singapore. That was a big luxury. In others, it was mostly constructed from tin sheets and concrete, and bricks when they could afford it.

Yes, what we saw and where we lived reified the images that many Singaporeans have etched in their minds- abject poverty and squalor. Too often, these images are often accompanied by this double-bind that they are expected to be grateful because "they are better off here" or that we do not have a moral and social obligation to treat them with respect and dignity because "they are used to such conditions anyway".

Are they better off here? And are they used to such conditions anyway? Well, there certainly is a case to be made of those claims. In most homes, a dining table was a luxury item. But still, the families continued to ply us with soft drinks and snacks, even if it was the fasting month for them. In one, the aged parents of Jahangir's wife even insisted that we use their bed while they slept on the floor, and even hauled our backpacks to the station on our departure. These are just some anecdotes from our time there.

Often, here, we consciously keep a distance, mark our turf, and chastise these men when they impinge on our public and personal space in Singapore. They are the "invisible visible". They build our roads, malls and houses everywhere. Yet they are expected to keep out of sight and out of mind. They reside in some periphery or backwater of our consciousness, or at Little India only for others. But it is precisely this unawareness, even ignorance, of the *unknown* that fuels contempt and fear. When we begin to unpack some of these myths of "danger", "rowdiness" and "anti-social" behavior, we are one step closer to understanding and treating each other as fellow human beings.

Living with the Bangladeshi families in remote villages made us rethink and reconfigure our perceptions and practices of hospitality, about warmth and generosity. These families, with so little and whose sons, fathers, brothers and husbands are in Singapore laboring away, still find the depth and capacity to host complete strangers whom they meet for the first time. With not much materially, the human touch they offered us was amplified many times more through their humble and modest gestures. They may have little, but they readily opened their hearts and homes to us.

In Bangladesh, we profiled 5 different men and their families. Each of them had a tale to tell. There was the absent dad who missed the formative years of his children's lives, the hopeless romantic who went against social conventions, the filial eldest son of a sick father, the returning bridegroom and the new father who have completed his migrant sojourn.

Each of them envisages an entire panorama of promise and prospects when they make the decision to come to Singapore. Their lives and stories are not any fundamentally any different from ours. We also fiercely protect the ones we love, relentless chase the dreams we harbor, want to provide for our family and all hope to emerge (*relatively*) unscathed in those pursuits. We can identify, at some level or another, with the stories. We can, because these stories are what make us human- both the Bangladesh migrants and ourselves too.

We recorded video messages in Bangladesh from family members and brought them back to Singapore for the men. And the lessons of hospitality and the genuine human touch remained with us. Instead of airing it in some public area (or in Little India *again*), we opened our homes to screen the snippets and clips for them. We came back from Bangladesh with new lenses.

With the recent spate of incidents involving migrant workers- their abysmal dorms, unpaid wages, their errant employers and even thuggery by repatriation companies- it is a convenient refrain that they should just *suck it up* or *be grateful to be here*. Whenever we are given to think that way, we implore you to remember that the migration journey here is not an *a-contextual* phenomenon involving nameless faces in Little India or anonymous cogs in our industrial machine. The causes and stories that compel them to come are ones that we all identify with, regardless of time and place.

TWC2's 2013 AGM

The details of the AGM's time, date and location are on the front page of this newsletter.

Under TWC2's constitution, we need a quorum of 'At least 25% of the total voting membership or 30 voting members, whichever is the lesser'. We are also reporting on the society's work in the past year, looking ahead, and electing a new committee, so it is hoped that all members who can make it will come along.

The following constitutional amendments are being proposed (they cannot be passed unless there is a quorum):

The one that we are certain about is required by Ministry of Social and Family Development (their email 23 Jan 2013). It is to insert a Section 17 after Section 18, saying:

"Cessation of Charity Status

17. In the event that the Society ceases to be a registered charity under the Charities Act, all debts and liabilities legally incurred on behalf of the Society shall be fully discharged, and the remaining funds will be donated to charitable organizations with similar objectives in Singapore which are registered under the Charities Act as the members of the Society may determine at the General Meeting, unless otherwise allowed by the Commissioner of Charities."

Following that, the existing Section 17 will be renumbered to Section 18.