



Transient Workers Count Too
DIGNITY OVERDUE

NEWSLETTER

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So, Are You Happy?

Speaking at the annual Foreign Domestic Workers Day event organized by FAST (Foreign Domestic Worker Association for Social Support and Training) and other organisations on 6th December, Sam Tan, Minister of State for Manpower, said:

“Through the combined effort of all parties, I am glad to share that the vast majority of FDWs attest that they are happy with the employment situation in Singapore. From the preliminary findings of a new survey conducted by MOM this year, with about 1,000 foreign domestic workers, we came to know that about 97% of FDWs were satisfied working in Singapore.”

A year before, the Migrant Workers’ Centre and Ministry of Manpower issued the results of a survey of 3,500 work permit holders (not including domestic workers) and 500 S-Pass holders that found that around 90 per cent of respondents were satisfied with working in Singapore.

What do responses such as these tell us?

They may give an over-optimistic picture of the views of migrant workers.

In the first place, the polling could only be done among workers to whom pollsters had access. In our experience, workers in the worst situations are either prevented from communicating freely by their employers (as in the case of those “no day off” domestic workers whose employers control all their contact with the outside world) or are afraid to speak up. On the other hand, workers in more favourable conditions (such as Malaysian migrant workers, who were apparently included in the earlier survey or long-established domestic workers who have weekly days off) may be over-represented in the samples questioned. This would tend to skew results.

Secondly, in polling generally, there’s a tendency among those polled to answer in ways that incline towards the desired outcome of the pollster; it is hard to produce really neutral questionnaires and polling methods.

This problem may be accentuated when a general question is asked about whether someone is “happy” or “satisfied” with their situation: while they can hold on to positive experiences in their lives, most people would probably hesitate to describe themselves as unhappy or dissatisfied.

But, even with these qualifications, TWC2 would expect that most workers would express themselves as generally happy or satisfied with their position in Singapore. Those who are treated decently, who get paid what they are due and have time to socialize, relax and rest no doubt generally do feel satisfaction with their lives here.

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TWC2’s AGM

We’ll soon be announcing the date of TWC2’s 2016 Annual General Meeting (AGM). It is open to all members to participate. If you are a current member, please renew your membership now; if your membership has lapsed or you have not joined, why not subscribe now?

We’d Also Like An Editor

This newsletter, now over ten years old, needs a new editor. If you support TWC2’s goals and think that you could volunteer the time and energy to take on producing it on a two-monthly basis, we’d like to hear from you.

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Events

November 3rd: The British Chamber of Commerce held a presentation on "Pillars of Diversity". The aim was to encourage diversity in workplaces. NGOs that participated had 30 seconds each to make a pitch to the audience, in the hope that they'd interest people there sufficiently for them to want to talk and find out more later on. John Gee, from TWC2's Research Sub-Committee, was one of those who spoke.

November 4th: Launch of "Vital Yet Vulnerable" Report, a study by researchers at the Singapore Management University (SMU) on the wellbeing of migrant workers in Singapore. The study showed significant differences in the mental wellbeing of workers awaiting the resolution of their cases compared to workers in normal employment situations, without outstanding problems. 62 per cent of surveyed workers with an injury or salary claim with the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and 13 per cent of surveyed regular workers were likely to suffer from serious mental illness, the study found.

The main drivers of emotional distress amongst workers surveyed were threats of deportation from employers, agent fee debt, and lack of housing for workers who have run away from their employers.

SMU School of Social Sciences' Assistant Professor of Sociology Nicholas Harrigan and SMU alumna Koh Chiu Yee authored the study, which was launched with a presentation and panel discussion at SMU. Panellists included Debbie Fordyce from Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), Jolovan Wham from the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), and Porsche Poh, from Silver Ribbon Singapore.

Report: The report can be found here:

http://www.smu.edu.sg/sites/default/files/smu/news_room/Research%20Report_Vital%20Yet%20Vulnerable%20%28FINAL%29.pdf



November 28th: TWC2 staff member, Min Yi, and volunteer, Satish, gave a presentation to male migrant workers at Fairfield Methodist Church. The church has been seeing an increase in the number of South Asian migrant workers attending its services and labour clinic with salary and injury problems.

The majority of the workers at the presentation were from Bangladesh, a handful were from India and there was one from Vietnam. The presentation covered salary rights, work injury rights and how to seek help. TWC2's "Bidesh Jawar Purbe (Before you go)" Bengali language video was shown to the workers. Altogether, there were over 120 men in attendance.

3 December 2015: A short talk from editors Sallie Yea and Debbie Fordyce launched "A Thousand and One Days (Volume Two): Stories of Hardship from South Asian Workers in Singapore", diaries from eight men on special pass for extended periods of time. The diaries are printed in both Bengali and English so that Bangladeshi workers can appreciate the value of their stories for researchers, the media, NGOs and Singapore government officials.

Those interested in obtaining a copy may contact Debbie at ddforyce@gmail.com. A donation of \$20 (or more) per copy would be appreciated.

13 December 2015: For International Migrants Day, an annual benefit event titled "Lunch with Heart" was held by TWC2. This year's event almost turned out a disaster because ticket sales got off to a very slow start. With one week to go, sales volume barely crossed the 100 mark. The minimal target was to sell 200. An SOS went out and many supporters rallied to our call. Ticket sales poured in during this last week. Cargill TSF Asia came in to sponsor 125 tickets. The lunch was ultimately a great success. 173 foreign workers were invited. Staff, volunteers and donors made up the rest of the 200-strong gathering. At the end of it all TWC2 raised close to \$40,000 from ticket sales and donations. This is a record sum in four years of organizing Lunch With Heart. The benefit lunch also commemorated International Migrants' Day



Indian Domestic Workers in Singapore

There are 227,000 domestic workers in Singapore, but no official break down by country of origin or ethnicity is available. It is hard to know what is happening to domestic workers as their work requires them to stay within the 'safety net' of a home. It is even harder when being kept safe means confinement to working behind closed doors, having no days off and even when a worker has days off, you have no one to talk to as you hardly know anyone from your home country. I am referring to India here, which is not one of the major countries of origin for domestic workers in Singapore.

I have been a volunteer with TWC2 for some time now. I have come across a few Indian domestic workers, many of whom had issues with their employers and sought our help. I have also met other domestic workers who are happy and are still with their employers. I am trying to pen down both their experiences here, hoping it will be useful to many others too. Since this is based on my experience, the list of points they raise is definitely not comprehensive.

Direct employment / agency – *"I came via an agency. I answered an ad in a local newspaper. My agency took the money from my employer and told me that my first three months of pay will be deducted. But when I got here, the local agency asked me for two months of my pay, and I told them to check with my agency in India. Luckily I had a relative in India who advised me on this,"* said Jothy explaining the path she took to get to Singapore. On the other hand Agila was employed directly by her employer. She was from the same village in India where the employer's family originated from. *"Many of us are recruited directly. It is even worse as we don't have an agent to talk to. When my employers did not allow me to return to my second daughter's wedding, I decided to leave. I did not even know the address of the place where I was staying. A relative who visits the family slipped me TWC2's details and I called them to rescue me."*

We hardly get days off – *"I get two days off in a month. Even when I get a day off, I just leave the house, as it is hard to take a break in my employer's house, and spend my day sitting and reading at the void deck a few blocks away. I don't have money in my hand to go far or go shopping, so I stay there,"* says Meena. She has been with her employer for two years now. On the other hand, Jyothi has gotten only one day off every month, and her employer has promised remuneration for the off days she has worked. As with her friend Meena, she does not go far and usually hangs around her employer's HDB flat too and that's how she

met Jyothi. However, later we learnt, due to her lack of knowledge of her contract and her pay, she did not get the additional 30 dollars she thought she should have been paid every month for the last 16 months. Unfortunately her contract shows that actual pay is only SGD 360 and month and her employer has been paying her SGD 400, which means they don't owe her anything. "At least we know each other, there are domestic workers whom we only see during funerals and we wonder who do they talk to when they have problems," says concerned Jyothi.

IPA/contract – Jyothi's experience sheds light on the fact of lack of contracts, how such contracts as exist differ from an IPA (In-Principle Approval) and whether the worker knows what is on her contract and how important this information is once they start working in Singapore.

Food – "I eat what is left over. That means some days there is too much and some days there is too little. The children's favourite food is kept aside, and my likes and dislikes are never considered. It's not too bad, I still get food to eat. However, on the days they (the family) go out for functions, they leave without clear instructions to me as to what I should eat for dinner; those days are more difficult than others," explains Jyothi when asked what are among the important aspects of working for her employer in Singapore. She mentioned being grateful that her employer shared the same culture and dietary restrictions as her, which is reflected in cooking.

Purpose of employment – "They employed me to care for the grandmother who died after a year plus that I worked for them. The trouble started afterwards. Once the grandmother passed away, I was asked on and off when am I leaving, although I have left a few months of my contract," Jyothi said. This is an important aspect of domestic workers' status that MOM should look into and design a clear and fair process to decide what happens when the purpose someone has been hired changes during her employment. Current policies in Singapore only recognise the caregiving needs when someone wants to employ a second domestic worker, but what about a first worker whose chief role, in fact, was caregiving, and may find herself no longer wanted, or with a family that then has very different work expectations of her?

Medical expenses – "My boss asked me to leave and asked me to reimburse my medical expenses before leaving. I got very sick when the haze condition worsened and I had to beg them to take me to hospital. When finally they did, the bill came to about \$200 and they said I should bear all the cost. That's when I decided to leave them," said Jyothi, explaining her decision to approach us at TWC2.

Embassies must take proactive measures by carrying out activities for the nationals of their countries (domestic workers both recruited through an agent and directly), by getting them to gather at a common place where they can upkeep the knowledge on their rights as domestic workers and learn new skills, language, cooking or grooming classes, learn skills that the domestic workers can take home and can be used to create income generating activities upon returning.

Balam Balambigai

Spy Cameras and Domestic Workers

Responding to media reporting on the use of spy cameras by some employers to watch domestic workers, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) and TWC2 issued a joint statement on 17th November ("Call to clarify law on filming domestic workers"). The societies said:

As organisations who work to promote women's and migrants' rights, we have strong concerns about this practice. Camera surveillance undermines workers' dignity and can be highly distressing for them. This impact exists even when cameras are only installed in areas such as living rooms or kitchens. But it is especially acute if all of a residence is included. Live-in workers then endure round-the-clock surveillance, with no moments of privacy in the entire 24-hour cycle, placing a heavy toll on mental well-being. In our view, the use of surveillance cameras in bathrooms and sleeping quarters, areas where people regularly undress and perform very private activities, do and should amount to offences punishable under the criminal law.

AWARE forwarded the statement to the Ministry of Manpower and Singapore Police Force and received a reply that said, in part:

It is an offence under the Penal Code to insult a woman's modesty by intruding upon her privacy. The offence is punishable with imprisonment of up to one year, or a fine, or both.

Employers must respect the privacy of their employees, and this applies equally to foreign domestic workers (FDWs) who work and reside in their homes. CCTVs should not be installed in areas that will compromise the FDWs' privacy, for example, where they change their clothes or the bathroom area.

TWC2 has consistently called for employer-employee relationships that involve open dialogue and building trust: the deployment of spy cameras does not encourage either: it suggests that the employers concerned think that domestic workers in general are

not to be trusted. Why? In most cases, human beings who are treated decently by others repay that treatment in kind: how many of the employers who deploy spy cameras believe deep down that they are not treating their domestic workers fairly and decently, and that they have reason to fear their ill-will?

An article on the theme of these cameras was subsequently published by *"The Forefront"*, an email bulletin distributed by TSMP law corporation. Written by Ian Lim and Gordon Lim, it provides a good overview of the laws that might apply to the use of spy cameras in homes to monitor domestic workers. We reproduce it below, with permission.

Maid Cameras: Naughty or Nice?

*He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows if you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake!*

Santa Claus, it's said, magically knows whether every boy and girl has been naughty or nice. As noted in a recent Straits Times article though, quite a few Singapore employers also seem to want a Santa-like ability to tell if their foreign domestic helpers have been 'misbehaving', only not by magic, but through CCTV cameras. The article tells of a maid horrified to discover a CCTV camera installed in her toilet, ostensibly so her employer could check why she was taking such 'long' toilet breaks. It's hopefully uncontroversial that having CCTV cameras in bathrooms is not right, and indeed possibly an illegal outrage of modesty. What about CCTVs in other parts of the house though? The ethical and legal issues of that are wider and more involved.

Workplace CCTV surveillance has become quite commonplace, and most employees no longer bat an eyelid at the sight of office CCTV cameras. Unlike other employees though, domestic helpers work, eat and sleep in their workplace. Living under near-constant CCTV monitoring must be stressful to say the least. To exacerbate matters, the current generation of internet-enabled cameras allows real-time viewing of CCTV feeds on smartphones, so employers can really be watching live at any time.

From the employers' point of view though, hiring a domestic helper does mean inviting a complete stranger to live in your home, prepare your food, and take care of your young children, elderly parents and valuables, all while you're away at work. And in fairness, there have certainly been wayward maids who've swiped valuables, abused children, or let shady characters into the house. CCTV cameras can help to detect and deter such misconduct, giving employers more peace of mind when they leave the house.

At the same time, CCTV cameras can sometimes also help maids. The footage may exonerate maids wrongly accused of misdeeds, say where it reveals that 'stolen' items were simply misplaced. The co-author of this article handled a pro-bono case where a domestic helper faced criminal charges for allegedly 'beating' her employer's son. The accusations were proven highly exaggerated: the CCTV footage just showed her patting the boy to sleep.

Also, video monitoring might help deter maid abuse. One might ask: couldn't a guilty employer simply delete the incriminating evidence? Well, if complaints can be made and investigations done swiftly enough, deleted data might be forensically retrieved. Even if not, unexplained gaps in CCTV records can be telling in Court.

Either way, whatever the merits or ethics of installing CCTV cameras at home, employers should be careful their use of CCTV does not break the law.

The Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) protects personal data, including video footage of individuals, and the collection and use of such footage requires informed consent. That's why it's now common to see signs at the entrances of buildings and car parks warning of CCTV monitoring. There are exceptions for purely domestic collection and use though, and employers may also collect and use employees' personal data for evaluative purposes without informed consent. It is not clear if domestic workers would necessarily fall under such exceptions.

The PDPA also requires that the collection and use of personal data (including CCTV footage) be reasonable. Even if the bathroom is out, it's likewise unclear if it would be considered reasonable to have CCTV cameras in other areas of the house, particularly in the maid's bedroom. Given that many domestic workers change in their bedrooms, having CCTV cameras there could also even amount to illegal outrage of modesty. Guidance from the Personal Data Protection Commission (PDPC) and possibly the police on these issues would be helpful.

Separately, the Protection from Harassment Act (POHA) states that keeping a victim under surveillance can be unlawful stalking where this causes harassment, alarm or distress. POHA even provides the illustration of a perpetrator who surreptitiously plants a video camera in his victim's apartment. This suggests employers should at least keep their helpers fully informed of CCTV cameras at home.

In any event, all the statutory and regulatory protections are essentially academic if domestic helpers do not come forward to complain of excessive surveillance. Being strangers in a strange land, domestic helpers may not know their legal rights, or who to go to for help. Further, even well-informed maids might hesitate to come forward for fear of being branded troublemakers and sent home. Groups such as the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) and Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) can provide safe havens and advocacy for mistreated domestic workers, but their resources are limited.

Perhaps the best way to help employers strike the correct balance with CCTVs would be for the authorities and regulators to provide relevant guidance, in tandem with outreach efforts to educate employers and maids on their respective rights and responsibilities and provide readily accessible help.

Meanwhile, as we sit down with our families to festive spreads this Christmas season, let's spare a thought for the maids who helped prepare the meal. Like Santa's elves they are often overlooked, even while some are constantly watched.

So, Are You Happy? *(Continued from Page One)*

They sense they are achieving something, they have friends and there are definitely things many like about living in a developed country away from their home communities: they have reasons to have positive views of their position.

Yet it would be wrong to respond to the stated satisfaction of these workers with complacency.

For one thing, a minority of 10 per cent of workers (or three per cent in the case of the domestic worker survey) expressing dissatisfaction, even if actually representative of the general state of migrant worker opinion, would still be a significant number of people: around 80,000 male workers and about 7000 domestic workers.

Secondly, general statements of happiness or satisfaction are very unrevealing of the real problems and discontents among any population. People who express positive views of their own situation, often, on questioning further, have quite definite ideas about ways in which their lives could be made better and about injustices that they wish could be remedied.

To be blunt about polls such as those cited, they can be a way for official bodies to reassure the public and damp down calls for reform; what would be more useful would be "fire brigade" polling, aimed not at glossing over problems, but bringing them into sharp relief with a view to resolving them in a timely and efficient manner. They would aim to solicit workers' views on what would make their lives in Singapore better and what problems they have faced. The results should also be broken down by categories such as nationality, profession and years of employment in Singapore: the views and experience of a young Bangladeshi construction worker facing 16 months plus debt repayment or a recently hired "no day off" Myanmar domestic worker are likely to be very different from those of well-established Chinese retail staff or veteran Filipina domestic workers, for example, and lumping them all together conceals real problem areas.

This approach might produce results that don't look as good from an official perspective, but would enable a focused response to real problems that could produce year on year progress in improving conditions for migrant workers here.

Of Cages and Coins: A Look into Ethical Recruitment for Migrant Workers

Samantha Louise V. Alfonso writes from the Philippines:

Migration in huge numbers is a common occurrence in almost every country, and the reasons for the diaspora are various. Some see this as a sign of development: after all, mobility is one way we exercise our rights as humans. However one noticeable, and perhaps alarming reason, particularly in South and South-east Asian countries, is the diaspora for employment, and the fact that these are mostly jobs for low-skilled workers. There is a lack of jobs for this particular work force in their countries of origin and while there are push and pull factors (push meaning opportunities and pull being the demand for workers abroad), the risks migrant workers face are very present and are not exaggerated by coverage they receive.

Recruitment agencies are supposed to give "reassurances" that one finds proper employment abroad that gives decent work, decent wages, and decent benefits—unfortunately, that is not always the case. The standard procedure is that a person comes to a recruitment agency or is "scouted" by a recruitment agency, and the agency would demand a certain fee (this can vary widely, from \$1,000-\$15,000, depending on the country of destination and the employment level one seeks); in the absence of financial resources, some recruitment agencies allow workers to borrow money and then repay this loan through deductions from their monthly wages upon work. There are instances where both are practiced (placement fee and deduction of wages). The concern here already is the factor that for one to be able to find some sort of employment, one needs to pay a fee.

It is also very commonplace that white-collar migrant workers are required to pay a fee to recruitment agencies (even if their wages are below minimum wage even in the county of destination, which is also common) and some of them have to deduct

from their wages in order to pay these fees in full or in addition to them. This often leaves them with inadequate means to sustain decent living abroad, let alone to send money and save for their families back home.

Migrant workers are often discouraged from staking claims on their rightful compensation due to lack of knowledge of their rights, lack of resources available (like legal services) or general fear of the recruitment agencies' powers and influence. In some instances where migrant workers are given compensation, it can usually be altered to a minimum amount.

In some cases, recruitment agencies mislead migrant workers with regards to the nature of their job, their housing, their compensation, maybe even the country of destination where these applicants hope to work in. Agencies often refuse liability and responsibility to the migrant workers once legal troubles arise (particularly if the party in conflict is also the employer of the migrant worker). This leaves the migrant workers vulnerable to various types of abuses and unable to seek help from authorities. There can also be a lack of compensation (from wages to necessities like adequate housing, food and water) and, in more unfortunate circumstances, some physical or mental impairment or even death.

In the Philippines it is prohibited to charge fees for recruitment until workers secure work abroad—and even in this case, this has to be regulated. While there are various laws and regulations established to enforce this, however, in practice, it is not done, as recruitment agencies still demand money for “processing assistance” (such as visa, housing and transportation costs) and deduct from the monthly wages of the worker to be able to pay off this fee. Though government agencies keep a list of pre-approved recruitment agencies to educate the public about the practices of each agency for a more informed decision, this is not a widely known mechanism and aspiring migrant workers are more inclined to follow advice from neighbours and family.

The lack of transparency and accountability is key in the issue—while recruitment has its place in the field of migrant workers and employment, there need to be enforced and standard procedures, duly centering on the well-being of the migrant worker. What we can do as citizens is to be made aware that these practices do happen and there is a need to modify them. This needs to be prioritized by legislation followed by an establishment of proper mechanisms (local, international, or regional) that will effectively propagate the wellness of migrant worker. This ensures that agencies as the middlemen are vigilant in following policies and are regulated on a consistent basis.

Sources: Wickramasekara, Piyasiri and Nilim Baruah, “Labour Migration for Decent Work in Afghanistan: Issues and Challenges”. SSRN Electronic Journal n. pag. Web.

Precious Time in Singapore

Starting from 1st January, 2013, foreign domestic workers in Singapore have officially had a right to rest at least one day every week (even if a proportion don't take it for one reason or another). This news might be still fresh in some of your memories. How do domestic workers use the days off? I visited some shopping centers, parks and workshop places to figure it out.

On a balmy Sunday afternoon, I strolled down to St. Andrew's Cathedral and spoke to several people who were enjoying the weather and a picnic. Among them, there was a group of eight people from the same village in Myanmar. They gather once a month and go for a picnic. One of them told me, “*We go to church, go to a picnic, take pictures and go back home. We have been to zoos, Marina Bay and Santosa for a picnic.*”

They are planning to go to somewhere on East Coast for their next picnic. Pictures which they took on picnics were to share with their families in Myanmar. After I finished interviewing them, they shared what they were eating with me; it was fried chick peas which they bought from one of the Myanmar stores in Peninsula Plaza. They purchased all of their food for the picnic there. Surrounded with their local cuisines and friends from back home, they seemed to make the most of their days off.

Perhaps most domestic workers of other nationalities do similar things for recreation.

Studying is another way to spend a weekly day off. At the fifth graduation ceremony of The Filipino Family Network (FFN)'s Sunday classes, students (all of them are domestic workers from the Philippines) presented their achievements confidently on the stage. As for the modelling presentation by cosmetology students, for example, all students wore elegant red dresses with various types of makeups and hairstyles which they learnt over half a year at the class. What made them more splendid was handmade fashionable accessories made by arts and craft graduating students. The FFN offered cosmetology, arts and crafts, floral arts, and computer classes in the past year. Rose, who received a certificate of flower arrangement at the ceremony, said:

I have done five classes. On Sundays, I cook, clean, have lunch, go to class for two hours and go back home for dinner.

Before taking classes in FFN, she attended classes offered by Trinity Community Church and aidha. According to Joan, a cosmetology teacher, each class runs for six months and aims to provide Filipino domestic workers with some useful skills when they go back to the Philippines. Joan said:

I only accept 10 people maximum for each class. If I accept more than that, I can give them less attention...a certificate from a cosmetology class is useful when opening small business like salons, and teaching the knowledge to others in the Philippines.

Joselyn, who is taking handicraft lessons, started to take classes at the FFN last year. The reason why she began taking such classes on Sundays was that *"I felt I had to learn something new. I need to upgrade myself. I learn something so that I can make a business when I go back home."*

Joselyn has also taken a lot of classes before. Next year, she is planning to take a class about entrepreneurship.

All of the teachers at the FFN classes are volunteers. Volunteering is also one of the ways to spend Sundays. Two weeks after the graduation ceremony, I visited classes offered by the FFN at TWC2's Day Space in Little India. Jonan has been volunteering at the FFN and TWC2 since 2011. She posts events such as party, barbecue, meeting, outreach and other events on the FFN facebook page. Also, she goes for outreach to Lucky Plaza to distribute pamphlets from TWC2. Listening to other domestic workers' stories, she gives advice and tells them about their rights in Singapore.

On 8 November, Indonesian Family Network (IFN), an organization run by Indonesian domestic workers, had a documentary session about Indonesian migrant workers in Netherland. According to Ummal, one of the founders of the IFN, *"This is to share different problems which Indonesian migrant workers in other countries face. It helps us raise awareness of others."*

Following the screening of the documentary, there was a discussion with Ajeng Ibunga from IMWU Netherland (an organization which made the documentary). Many participants actively asked her questions. According to Nurida, President of the IFN, there was a workshop before the documentary regarding their legal rights in Singapore and in Indonesia as well as how to deal with problems which domestic workers in Indonesia might face in Singapore.

Even though there were no classes going on when I visited IFN, a number of domestic workers from the IFN were participating in Sunday classes. For instance, Ipah, who joined the IFN in 2012, has taken English Basic, Home Baking and Silat classes before. Silat is the Malay art of self-defense. Currently, Ipah is volunteering as accountant of the IFN. Erni, who has been a volunteer at the IFN since 2013, has participated in classes such as English language, computer, handicraft, bracelet making and make-up. When she does not have any classes, she visits her friends and helps them by giving advice, such as how to talk to employers.

On the same day, there was a book launch at Toa Payoh West Community Club. Thirteen domestic workers from Indonesia wrote about the theme of the book "Purple Colour" and published a book called "Ungu Bercerita". The editor, Anung, has published eight books and encouraged other domestic workers to continue writing. She emphasized it by saying: *"If you want to write, just write, no matter what. And then you can learn by doing."*

Two weeks after the book launch, I met her again and asked how she has collaborated with other domestic workers to publish books. To start with, she created an online group for those who are interested in writing. Indonesian domestic workers in the group write according to a topic of the day (such as romance) and post their writing on the group's Facebook page. Anung gives marks and feedback to each essay. They repeat this process again and again, and polish their writing skills little by little. Then they will meet face to face in the real world on Sundays to prepare for publishing books. Writing can be difficult, but Anung stressed the importance of beginning to write and continuing it: *"Everyone is not a writer from the beginning. Just write, at least you can understand...If you continue writing, you learn slowly."*

Mayu Matsuo

Stories of Hardship from South Asian Workers

We each perceive the welfare of migrant workers from a particular point of view. Some identify the need for regulations and laws to better serve the interests of workers, others the need for acceptable standards of food, transportation and housing, more reliable access to medical treatment, the ability to switch jobs, freedom to negotiate terms of employment without fear of repatriation, or the reduction or abolition of recruitment fees. We often overlook the personal worries and concerns of the men themselves. "A Thousand and One Days: Stories of Hardship from South Asian Workers in Singapore", Volume Two collects the diaries of eight men placed on special pass for months and years without access to legal work or other support while their families in Bangladesh remain dependent on remittances. Below are excerpts, including both the mundane and the alarming personal details that our questions might never have revealed.

The desperation that drives men to seek work abroad

“After a year and a half, my first child, Raihan, was born. Then my economic problems got worse. My child didn't drink his mother's milk, so we had to feed him powdered milk. One day, I saw that my child was fed rice water instead of powdered milk. After seeing that, I got more pain. Inwardly, I was disgusted with myself because I'm a man who can't even take care of his dear wife and little child. I couldn't raise my little baby properly. I decided that I have to find a way to take care of my family.”

The recruitment

“One day, one of [my] friends told me that everybody was going to Singapore, and I asked how... I said I didn't know anything about this and had never heard about it before. Besides, I had no ability to go to the training centre. How could I manage the [SGD7300-9100] to go to Singapore? This had never been part of my dream... I said to my friend that I was okay staying with my family. He called me a fool and said if I go to Singapore I would get [SGD910-1100] each month. He convinced me that I could start a big business after a few years in Singapore.”

The envy of others who've gone abroad

“One of my neighbours lives abroad in Italy and sends a lot of money to his family. He bought some land and made a very nice house. That is why I thought I'd like to go to Italy to work. My neighbour's uncle sends people to Italy to work; some make it, and some are caught. If the men are caught, then they must get their money back. He sends the people to Italy with fake visas. He told me it would cost BDT400,000, but I couldn't manage that money.”

The harsh reality of the living situation

“I never imagined I would have to sleep in a place like that after spending so much money to get here. When I spoke to Father and Mother on the phone, I told them I was well and at peace. But I couldn't hide my feelings from my mother. She said, 'Why does it seem to me that you are not at peace. Are you lying to me?' I insisted again that I was happy.”

“After working the first month, I got my salary of SGD550. After that, I was not given my proper salary. For about four months, I was given no salary. From Bangladesh, Father and Mother said again and again: People have been pressuring us for money, so please send money soon.”

The difficulty of the job in Singapore

“After Eid, life's daily struggle began again. 16 hours work at a time, from night 6pm to morning 10am. There was no good condition of sleep after working 16 hours in the company. The day and night shift workers stayed together in the same room, which is why sleep was so difficult. I had no choice but to continue on in that way. I lived in the hope that happiness would come one day. I counted the days as they passed and looked for a path to the future. Would the day of happiness ever come or would my dream float in the darkness? Waiting, I counted the days.”

Troubles with MOM

“After some days, MOM called us and said, 'You entered Singapore on one visa for landscaping, but you did a different job, so you have to go back home to Bangladesh.' With that revelation, it seemed the sky had fallen on our heads. Who saw our crying that day? We pleaded to the MOM officer, 'Sir, what will happen to us, to our money? We can't go back home in this condition.' The MOM officer said, 'You worked illegally, so you must go home.' We denied this accusation and argued that we were victims. Then he said to leave and he would call us back another day, without giving us any answers to our pleas.”

Communication with family while on special pass

“I came back home and I had my dinner, but nothing feels good. All I could do was think about my problems. I called home. When I call home I feel very sad. This month I could not send any money for my father and mother. They only want money but I couldn't tell them about my situation. If I tell them, they will think: This time you have the same problem again? Only you and not others?”

Expectations of family and neighbours after returning home

“People believed I had brought a lot of money back from Singapore, so if I went to the village market they asked me to buy them tea, cigarettes etc. Some people asked about getting a visa. My relatives were coming again and again to my house to ask for the money they loaned but I couldn't return it. Day by day, my family relations and reputation were going down. Previously, we had no money and nobody asked me for any, not personally or at the shops, now people think that I have money but I am not giving them any...I couldn't even mix with my close friends out of shame.”

The second volume of this book is available for a donation of \$20 (or more). Proceeds from the book are used to assist workers whose lives are demolished by their migration to Singapore. To order, contact Debbie at ddforyce@gmail.com

In Brief: Domestic Worker Numbers

Official statistics don't provide a breakdown of migrant workers by nationality, but occasionally, estimates based on embassy and agency figures are cited in the media. Writing about their embassy's call for Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore to be paid at least \$550 from the start of 2016, Joanna Seow says:

"There are around 125,000 Indonesian maids in Singapore, and about 70,000 from the Philippines. These make up the lion's share of the more than 227,000 domestic workers here, with others coming from such countries as India, Sri Lanka and Thailand." ("Maids' pay rise boon or bane?" "Straits Times", 12th November 2015).

The largest group after Indonesians and Filipinas is most likely to be Myanmar workers: reports in 2014 spoke of there being 30,000 in Singapore.

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

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Type: Current Account

Number: 006-900625-0

Bank code: 7171

Swift Code: DBSSSGSG

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