



Transient Workers Count Too
DIGNITY OVERDUE

NEWSLETTER

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FOR ALL

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Hidden Casualties

At the beginning of April, it was reported that Keppel Corporation had reduced its sub-contractor workforce in Singapore by 7,900. Oil rig construction forms a major part of the company's business, so the worldwide oil glut and fall in prices has hit KepCorp hard, with demand down and one major foreign customer facing bankruptcy.

Just as when accident statistics are reported, the nationality of the workers killed and injured is not indicated, reports on the job cuts at KepCorp did not give the casual reader any inkling that the 7,900 whose jobs went were probably all – or almost all – migrant workers.

The employment of low-waged temporary migrant workers gives a massive hidden subsidy to Singapore society as a whole: if the labour force that builds, cleans, drives buses and works in restaurants and homes had to be supplied in full from locals or replaced by automation in some way, there would be a hefty across the board rise in business and living costs. That is quite obvious.

Another consequence of employing large numbers of migrant workers to do the jobs locals won't do is that it makes health care and employment figures look better. They would probably compare favourably with those of other developed countries anyway, but not as favourably as they do now.

Singaporeans are among the world's longest-lived people, with a life expectancy at birth of 83 years. The unemployment rate for citizens at the end of 2015 was three per cent. Without denigrating the achievements both these figures represent, it is legitimate to consider how policies on migrant labour may help to deliver them.

Migrant workers form a third of the country's workforce and perform the bulk of the work that is dirty or dangerous – notably, in the construction and cleaning sectors. They are far more likely than locals to suffer injury or death at work. The long-term impact of their working and living environment is largely unresearched, but the experience of workers considered to be unskilled or semi-skilled in long-developed countries points to substantial health differences arising between these strata and those in white collar jobs. However, as the corresponding elements in Singapore's labour force are employed on a strictly temporary basis, their longer-term health problems, including a probable lower life expectancy than locals have, are exported to their countries of origin.

Likewise, in the job market, the existence of a temporary migrant labour force allows downturns in demand for workers to be met by, at best, not renewing some workers' contracts when they end or, at worst, firing them and sending them home part way through a contract term. They therefore do not raise Singapore's unemployment rate. This is certainly seen as a virtue by the government, which regards it as a useful element of flexibility in the national economy.

(Continued on Page Two)

TWC2's 2016 Annual General Meeting (AGM)

Time: 3pm-6pm, Sunday 24th April.

*Venue: The Academy of Certified
Counsellors, 9, Penang Road,
Fortitude Room, #13-19 Park Mall.*

*All members are welcome to
participate. If you were a member last
year, please renew your membership
now; if your membership has lapsed or
you have not joined, why not subscribe
now? A membership form appears at
the end of this newsletter.*

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It might be asked whether there is really anything wrong about this situation: after all, many of the workers would probably have undertaken work that was also injurious to their health if they'd stayed in their countries of origin, and they might have been unemployed in their home country, without having the possibility of earning the kind of money they could in Singapore.

Perhaps: still, there are clearly ethical problems here that at least demand alleviation.

This situation calls for modesty: the country may have further to go in raising health standards and improving employment opportunities than seems to be the case at first glance. It also calls for consideration of the long-term: can it go on the same way? Development in countries of origin and the appeal of destination countries that pay higher salaries to migrant workers are likely to have an impact over time, and then it may become necessary to encourage more locals to go into jobs they now reject. That's only likely to happen if those who perform such jobs are treated respectfully, paid decent salaries and have safe working environments. Which, of course, brings the issue back to the present status of migrant workers, and how it needs to evolve.

Events

January 5th: Day School for SOTA students. "We had a great session with the School of the Arts (SOTA) students - Grace and I gave presentations about migrant construction workers and domestic workers respectively, and then Grace led them on a tour of Little India. We shared betel nut leaves and she talked about "Little Bangladesh", and how men group in particular spots according to village origin or language spoken -- a specific and richly-textured social space, in contrast to the way that migrant construction workers are often seen as a kind of 'undifferentiated horde'. She also showed us an unlicensed dormitory, posters aimed at policing the behaviour of migrant men, and other advertisements for "bed spaces" for rent. The students were very engaged and asked excellent, thoughtful questions; many were able to grasp legal processes quickly and asked incisively about visa regimes and due political processes." (From Kellynn)



Grace Baey talks with SOTA students on a walking tour in Little India.

January 20th: United World College of South-East Asia. For our presentation, the UWC provided us with a bus for about 20 workers and five TWC2 volunteers. Debbie gave a 30 minute power point presentation to the first group of about 100 students, followed by questions and answers and a more intimate conversation with the men spread out between five classrooms. Each group of students included Bengali and Tamil speakers to assist with posing questions directly to the workers.

After the first session, the men were invited to lunch in the school canteen, then they went on a short trip to IKEA in Tampines where the men posed in the model living rooms, bedrooms and offices on display in IKEA. No matter what their present living situation or difficulty with proving their injury or salary claim, all the men enjoyed lounging on the display furniture as if they belonged to that comfortable lifestyle.

We returned to the UWC campus for another presentation and breakout into the five classrooms. Listening to the students

putting questions to the workers, it seemed as if there's a lack of understanding about the desperate situation involving deceptive recruitment processes and indebtedness. The students asked about conditions relating to the work and the wait for injury compensations such as the hours worked, the quality of the food, the medical care and the cost of lodging. It's obviously hard to grasp that the families of these men are without the land that once sustained them, without the remittances that should have resulted from the work in Singapore, and now burdened by debt and debt collectors. Students who will never experience these hardships need time to fully comprehend this situation and these sessions are an important place to start. *(From Debbie)*

January 31st-February 4th: "Migrant Workers Awareness Week was a week long project, organized by a group of Yale-NUS and NUS Law Students, with the aim of raising awareness on issues that migrant workers face in Singapore. With the help of 80 volunteers, students organized nine events to engage participants from all walks of life, including over 100 migrant workers. On the first day, migrant workers and students gathered for a Chinese New Year celebration where they enjoyed traditional Yu Sheng and engaged in a number of fun activities.

The events of the week ranged from panel discussions with various experts, to an arts exhibition, to various activities where students had the opportunity to make friends with migrant workers and learn about their lives in a more intimate setting. The week-long project ended with a Dialogue in the Dark, where participants had a chance to reflect on their experiences in a unique way. Darkness reduces barriers and creates an opportunity to empathize with those we initially consider 'others'. The event provided an opportunity to learn more about the lives of migrant workers in an intimate setting and to prompt participants to question their beliefs by engaging in thought-provoking conversations with domestic workers, construction workers, sex workers and people from all walks of life." *(From Marusa)*

Filipina domestic worker, Angie Jerez, says, "I'm happy that I volunteered myself. It was a very friendly talk where every participant had a chance to share our life here in Singapore. Doesn't matter whatever our status is, either you are Singaporean or Foreigner, Executive or Domestic Worker, young or old. I found out that we all have something in common. We all feel different from the rest, that we are trying too hard to fit in and that make us feel more uncomfortable about ourselves. I must say that as a domestic worker here I'm a little bit different and I'm happy about it, now I don't feel the stress that I need to be someone else just to fit in. After all, we are all different and yet we are all the same. Thank you so much."

You can read more about MVAW here: <http://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/newsroom/12-february-2016-yale-nus-hosts-weeklong-series-of-events-to-raise-awareness-on-migrant-workers-issues/>

TWC2 members spoke at two of the week's events.

Though attendance was low, audience interest was high at the opening panel discussion at Yale-NUS on 1st February 2016. Victorio M. Dimagiba, Jr., Minister & Consul General of the Philippines Embassy described the employment situation for Filipinos working in Singapore (only 40% work as FDW, the remainder in finance, food and beverage and nursing) and the services offered by the embassy.

Alex Au, from TWC2, challenged Singapore's existing practice of training construction workers in their home country (with its associated steep agents' fees) and proposed a system where training would be offered in Singapore (potentially through the ITEs) and work permit holders would be free to change employers (just as Singaporeans do).

Jolovan Wham, executive director of HOME, spoke about the image of foreign domestic workers in Singapore's media and how this may hinder domestic workers from being seen as employees with rights (such as work hours and rest days).

Tan Fang Qun, Deputy Director, Workplace Policy & Strategy Division, MOM reviewed MOM's enforcement and worker protection policies. *(From Pat)*

On February 3rd, John Gee, TWC2's research head, spoke on a panel along with Desmond Chin of Nation Employment Agency and Caryn Lim from MOM on the theme of "Foreign Domestic Worker: Foreigner or Family?" at Yale-NUS College.

TWC2's CAREFund at Work

TWC2's CAREFund (Compassion and Relief for Emergencies Fund) comes into use when, for one reason or another, a worker is unable to obtain support in an emergency from his or her employer. This can happen, for example, when a worker falls ill while waiting for a case to be settled, or when an employer declares bankruptcy after a worker's workplace accident. Debbie Fordyce writes about three of the workers assisted by the CAREFund in the recent past.

Hole in the Heart

The first time I noticed Sumon was on a Friday evening in early August 2015. He had badly swollen feet and legs and was running a low-grade fever. He looked a mess - a young man either negligent or simply dangerously unaware of his deteriorating health.

After we completed the meal at The Cuff Road Project, I asked him to accompany me to a local clinic in Little India to have a doctor examine him. It was past 9:00PM and the clinic was closed. I gave him \$50 and insisted that he visit that clinic the next morning (Saturday), and see me at noon that day with a report from the doctor. He didn't show up then, nor at our meal program until about a week later. Again he appeared unconcerned about what looked like serious medical issues.

He was having trouble walking, both legs were swollen, and he wore exercise pants, possibly because he couldn't fit his jeans over his legs. I again insisted that he see the clinic doctor for the problem, for which he received antibiotics and antiseptic cream. Only after that did he show me the echocardiogram that had been done at National University Hospital on 11th March, three days after the date of his workplace injury. He had filed a work injury claim for chest pain after a fall, but the medical report showed PDA (patent ductus arteriosus), or hole in the heart. Since he had an appointment scheduled for 18th August, I was glad to accompany him to speak to the doctor.

The doctor wrote that his condition was PDA. Commonly referred to as hole in the heart, the symptoms include shortness of breath and heart palpitations and the problem may result in infection of the lining of the heart; an enlarged heart (cardiomyopathy); pulmonary hypertension (high blood pressure in the lungs); congestive heart failure; and death.

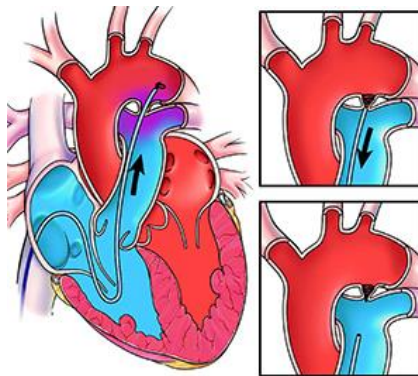
The doctor explained that this condition is congenital, and could not have resulted from a fall or a thrust. He explained that this is easily detectable by listening to the heart with a stethoscope, which is why most cases are diagnosed soon after birth. I tried it and it's true: the sound of blood flow with a 'hole in the heart' is distinctly different from the thump-thump of a normal heartbeat. Doctors examine babies at birth in Singapore, so this problem is unusual here in an adult.

Sumon must have noticed the symptoms of the PDA only after a fall or an impact at work, and so lodged an injury claim. Because his family depended on him for the remittances he'd been sending home, he was determined to continue working, possibly exacerbating the problem.

The hospital estimated the cost of the operation to close the hole in the heart at \$22,000. A fitted plug is delivered to the site of the PDA by a catheter inserted in the groin. The device is positioned in the opening between the two blood vessels and released from the catheter. Most patients have complete closure of the defect within one year of the procedure. Sumon was warded for three days for the procedure and discharged with residual pain at the site of insertion. Several TWC2 volunteers visited him while he was warded, making him feel that his health and welfare were a real concern for us.

Because of his early discharge and lack of complications, the actual cost for this unsubsidized procedure was \$13,000. TWC2 was pleased to have used this amount for Sumon, aware of the risk to him of this remaining untreated and the probability that his family would not have sufficient funds for this after his return.

Sumon was demonstrably grateful to the doctor and to TWC2. He credits TWC2 with saving his life, now as he awaits the result of his work injury compensation claim.



Direct Inguinal Hernia

Mojibur approached TWC2 in September 2015 for multiple problems. He hadn't been paid for six months, but had dropped the claim due to threats from the employer. He had lodged an injury claim but the Ministry of Manpower had determined that the injury did not result from a workplace accident. And he suffered from a scrotal hernia.

The diagnosis was direct inguinal hernia. This type is usually caused by trauma to the area from repeated stress of lifting heavy objects, frequent coughing, or straining while using the toilet. The intestine, lining, or intestinal fat pass through the weakened muscles near the groin and genitals.

While our social workers and volunteers followed up by liaising with the Ministry of Manpower about the injury claim, and investigated the police report and the claim to MOM concerning the unpaid salary, aware that the outcome of these problems was uncertain, we were confident that the hernia was treatable and that our CAREFund would cover the cost. The hernia was causing Mojibur considerable discomfort. After walking a short distance he would have to rest and put pressure on the abdomen to push the protruding intestines back in the abdomen.

The operation required a one night's hospital stay at an estimated cost on \$3,380. The procedure involved a surgical probe to guide other probes to cut, apply a mesh to reinforce the abdominal wall and stitch the muscle wall. Mojibur complained for several days after the procedure. In spite of the pain, the procedure was simple and successful.

Given the uncertainty that Mojibur still faces with his injury and salary claims, we were pleased to be able to use the CAREFund to treat this medical problem for him.



(Picture from Wikipedia)

Abscess Tooth

Most of the CareFund expenses are for smaller and more common complaints than those described above. Many men suffer from cough, fever and flu at some time during their stay in Singapore. We pay for a clinic in Little India to check to make sure that it's nothing serious and to dispense Panadol and bed rest if necessary. The ability to consult with a doctor offers an important reassurance for migrant workers without means and without company support.

An infected tooth, however, requires extraction. When an abscess forms it causes inflammation of the tissues inside the tooth, causing throbbing and pulsating, with intermittent sharp pain. The simple remedy is to extract the tooth and prescribe antibiotics. This is what the dentist did for Shahidulla, a regular and long-term participant at The Cuff Road Project.

Shahidulla has been charged with making a false claim for work injury compensation and is relying on pro bono legal advice. TWC2 is interested in the outcome of this case and could hardly allow Shahidulla suffer from toothache. He was injured in March 2014, almost two years ago, and we have no way of knowing how much longer the legal case will take, or what the outcome.



Between 500 and 600 male migrant workers seek TWC2's assistance every month, most of them through the Cuff Road Project. Often by the time the men come to us, their employers are unwilling to offer even minimal support for such ordinary problems as tooth infections. If the men have made a claim for unpaid or underpaid salary, or are awaiting compensation for a workplace injury, they may be required to remain in Singapore for months, or even years without their company's support. This can result in unbearable suffering due to medical issues that are easily treated.

We depend on donations for this medical assistance and we will always make an effort to relieve the physical suffering of migrant workers when necessary. Tending to medical needs is often easier than addressing their more complex problems resulting from the lack of cooperation from employers, inability to supply evidence to prove claims and inadequate regulations to protect transient worker rights.

Just Passing Through

Most agents and employers take away migrant workers' passports from them as if they are fully entitled to do so. Early last year, **Kellynn Wee** and **Marusa Godina** undertook a research project into the question of migrant workers and their passports. They not only looked into the legal position but also the practical problems around passport retention and what workers themselves thought about the question. This article was first published on the TWC2 website on 21st May 2015.

The Singapore passport is powerful. [According to the international 2014 Visa Restrictions Index](#), this neat crimson document offers Singaporeans visa-free travel to 167 out of 219 countries in the world, making our passport sixth in the world in terms of global mobility.

Singaporeans' easy trips in and out of holiday hotspots contrast with the inflow of migrants who come here to work. While we hang on tight to our passports when overseas, migrants must give theirs up to brokers, agents, and employers in order to work in Singapore.

"In a perfect world," Debbie Fordyce says, *"the workers should hold on to their passports. But given what we have now..."*

Debbie is the TWC2 executive committee member who coordinates The Cuff Road Project, TWC2's "soup kitchen" for injured workers. She tells us that construction workers who come to Singapore from Bangladesh or India are met at the airport by their agent or the employer. These men immediately surrender their passports to the person who greets them.

According to the Passports Act, it is [against the law](#) for employers and other persons to retain passports without "reasonable excuse". In 2010, two employment agencies were [fined \\$2,600](#) for retaining domestic workers' passports.

Yet despite the existence of laws which forbid the retention of identification documents, migrant workers continue to give up their passports, apparently willingly, and employers are often anxious to hold on to them. What are the conditions which create this particular situation in Singapore?

An imperfect world

After arriving, the construction worker goes for a medical check-up and has his Work Permit made at the Ministry of Manpower. Throughout this process, he seldom holds on to his passport — an agent or his employer will safeguard it and produce it at the necessary junctures.

Most men are comfortable with surrendering their passports, but this is because workers frequently do not have private spaces in dormitories to store their belongings. Due to this lack of access to a secure private space, most construction workers also have to keep their phones and wallets on them at all times, even when they are sleeping or wearing comfortable clothes such as sarongs while off work.

As a result, many construction workers have little choice but to leave their passports to their employers for safekeeping.

Spite and malice

Problems arise when a man has to stop working due to an injury or a salary dispute with his employer.

When this situation occurs, the migrant construction worker is put on a Special Pass, which extends his stay in Singapore while the injury or salary claim is processed. When a worker is on a Special Pass, he is not allowed to work.

The worker's passport has to be shown every time his Special Pass is extended. At this point, the passport is usually held by the employer. When it is time for his Special Pass to be extended, some employers deliberately withhold passports to inconvenience the construction worker. There is no benefit to the employer in doing so, as withholding a worker's passport does not affect the legal processing of the salary or injury claim.

"The employers seem to behave as they do out of malice," Debbie says. *"Often, in these cases, the employer may have physically beaten the worker, refused to return the passport, and then claimed to never have had the passport at all and that the worker must have lost it himself."*

If the passport is deliberately withheld at this point, the worker cannot extend his Special Pass, which makes his stay here in Singapore illegal. As a result, men risk arrest and possible deportation.

In these cases, the worker must make a police report and apply for a new passport — kickstarting administrative processes which take time, energy, and money.

Not only is the process of engaging with a foreign bureaucratic system a daunting undertaking for a foreigner whose stay in Singapore is precarious, but workers are short of the money they need to cough up to get the passport replaced.

For a Bangladeshi worker, applying for a passport would cost between SGD \$191 - \$286, depending on the urgency of the request. As workers cannot work when they are on a Special Pass, this is considered a princely sum. Even while they are working, Bangladeshi construction workers [mostly earn less than SGD \\$20 a day](#).

The lorry driver and the passport

Polash and Palush, two construction workers who [approached TWC2 for help](#) in 2014, faced problems with an employer who claimed to have lost their passports. According to the employer, a lorry driver had 'run away' with them.

"How can boss man say he have passport, and then next day say he don't have passport?" asks Polash.

Debbie and Karno, TWC2's social worker, believe that one way to resolve this problem would be to institute a simple system: at point of entry, workers should trade their passports for signed notes which indicate that their passports have been handed to their employers for safekeeping.

This will protect workers who may encounter employers who 'misplace' passports in the future.

"There is nothing to gain from withholding a worker's passport," says Debbie. *"It is common knowledge that employers hold passports, but the worker often cannot produce any proof, which limits what the Ministry of Manpower can do. Whether or not the employer has lost it intentionally, the worker will have to pay for a new one at the end of the day."*

But Debbie and Karno also acknowledge that their solution remedies a symptom, and does not attack the root of the problem — which is the worker's acute vulnerability when he is in Singapore.

While this article focuses on the immediate problems of Bangladeshi construction workers, withholding passports — a practice common amongst employers of domestic workers as well — denies all migrant workers a legal document that asserts their rights as citizens of their countries. It also diminishes their freedom of movement: in fact, the International Labour Organisation [defines the retention of identification documents](#) and passports as an indicator of forced labour and exploitation.

On a more personal level, it is a cause of undue stress and worry for any migrant worker, who may be anxious about his or her ability to return home safely.

Defenders of the law

Sometimes, law firms who take up cases of work injury compensation will hold on to construction workers' passports while managing their claims. Lawyers can stand to earn substantial amounts from work injury compensation cases.

If a worker decides he wants to discharge the lawyer, the lawyer may demand a sum of money from the worker before returning his passport. This is a form of illegal extortion, but to TWC2's knowledge, this is a common practice.

Debbie and Karno say that TWC2 and workers face more passport-related woes from lawyers than employers. Instead of assisting migrant workers who have very little bargaining power, lawyers are turning the screw instead.

Passport retention is one of many issues that migrant workers in Singapore face with their documents. Construction workers often do not receive itemised pay slips, are pressured to sign blank salary forms, or have their wages arbitrarily deducted without good reason.

Some employers receive money from illicit kickbacks: just recently, the managing director of a construction firm [was sentenced to jail](#) and fined \$169,000 for receiving kickbacks from workers.

Workers' vulnerabilities are often due to their exclusion from formalised documentation, and their unfamiliarity with local procedures.

What can be done

In the short term, giving workers standardised signed notes which indicate that a worker has given up his passport to his employer for safekeeping is a simple system that can be instituted which may help protect the worker in the future should any disputes arise between him and the employer.

The lack of a secure space is one of the reasons that workers decide to give up their passports. Providing safe lockers for workers in dormitories may afford them more privacy and control over their valuables.

Frontline officers, such as the police, can be better sensitised when dealing with passports disputes. Some officers believe that lawyers have a right to charge the worker before the worker reclaims his passport. Lawyers should be advised on the illegality of retaining a passport in order to obtain money from workers.

Employers feel compelled to keep workers' passports largely because of the government-mandated security bond, fearing that they will lose their deposit should a worker abscond and isn't repatriated within 30 days. They hold on to workers' passports to minimise the financial risk to themselves.

There are alternatives to confiscating passports in order to gain workers' loyalty, such as focusing on building relationships of trust, open communication, and professionalism. These ways are better in the long-run: they benefit both sides and lay the foundations for a long-lasting professional relationship.

Long-term employee-employer relationships allow workers to gain skills and experience which increase productivity and minimise workplace safety issues, and give employers a chance to relax and focus on the job instead of worrying about the loyalty of their employees.

In the long term, the usage of the security bond to ensure that workers are returned home at the end of their period of employment should be rethought.

With increasingly sophisticated techniques of documentation and a more restrictive policy on issuing In Principle Approvals, Singapore can rely on controls at its borders to manage the coming and going of migrant workers.

We should allow greater mobility within Singapore to anyone who remains in the country during the validity period of his/her latest Work Permit instead of allowing the threat of repatriation to hang like a black cloud over the heads of migrant workers.

Under subsections 2 and 3 of section 57 of the Passports Act, Singapore passports cannot be given as a security, pledge, deposit or encumbrance.

Although this specific subsection does not apply to foreign passports, it is indicative of what we expect of ourselves — and how we might do better by migrant workers.

67.1 Million Domestic Workers

150.3 million people are migrant workers, and of those, 44.3 per cent, or 66.6 million, are women, according to a report published by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in December. “ILO estimates on migrant workers” provides breakdowns on migrant worker employment by sector and region, as well as gender. The ILO’s aim in compiling these statistics was to provide a sound factual basis for debate on migrant workers.

The report has a special focus on domestic workers. It says that there are 67.1 million domestic workers worldwide, of whom 11.5 million are transnational migrants. Of those, 9.1 million, or 80 per cent, are employed in high income countries. Although domestic work is widely assumed to be almost exclusively a female occupation, 26.6 per cent of migrant domestic workers are male. Just over half of these men are employed in the Arab states.

While just 7.8 per cent of all migrant workers are employed in the region called South Eastern Asia and the Pacific in the ILO report, this area is the largest employer of migrant domestic workers, with 24 per cent of the world’s total.

The full ILO report can be downloaded at:

http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_436343.pdf

More Countries Ratify Domestic Workers Convention: In the July-August 2015 TWC2 Newsletter, we reported that so far that year, three more countries (Finland, Dominican Republic and Panama) had ratified the International Labour Organisation’s Convention 189, commonly called the Domestic Workers’ Convention. Three more countries ratified it last year: Chile, Belgium and Portugal. This brings the world total to 22.

Indonesia’s House of Representatives has recommended a Domestic Workers’ Bill for inclusion among legislation to be considered in 2016. Indonesian migrant rights NGOs are pressing for the bill to be passed and for Indonesia to ratify C189.

Beware Internet Con Artists

Migrant workers generally have to work long hours for low pay, while living far away from their family and the life they were used to, so there is something especially despicable about people who try to cheat them out of their earnings.

I’ve recently heard from three domestic workers who told a similar story. Through the internet, they came in contact with a man in England who was very nice to them and who sent them photos of himself. He seemed like quite a charmer. Then each woman received a message that one of his parents had died, another had suffered an injury and he was stranded in another country. He said that he urgently needed money and asked them to send it to his bank account.

One of the women did send money to this “boyfriend”, and she hasn’t heard from him since. The others did not have any money to send straight away, which was just as well, because, the more they thought about what they’d been told, the less believable it seemed. It was possible that he was in the situation he described, but was it probable? How come he had access to the internet and to a bank account, but claimed to be so desperate that he had to turn to his domestic worker “girlfriend” and ask money from her? Moreover, two of the women were able to compare the stories they heard, and they seemed suspiciously alike.

Workers are well advised not to fall for such appeals for help: they are almost certainly a means of cheating them out of their money. They can help each other by passing on what they hear about scams and con tricks so that other workers don’t end up losing money and feeling betrayed by someone who won their trust.

John Gee

Migrant Forum in Asia: International Migrants Day Statement

On International Migrants Day this year we celebrate the extraordinary contributions that migrants make to societies all over the world. Migration flows today are at unprecedented levels: the number of people living and working outside their country of birth well exceeds the population of Brazil, the fifth largest country in the world. On this day, then, let us be reminded not only of the extent of their contribution, but also of the enormity of the need to respect their dignity, rights, and freedom from discrimination and exploitation.

Sustainable Development Goals

We celebrate this year the acknowledgement in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of migrant workers' contributions to inclusive growth and sustainable development as well as the commitment made by States to insure full respect for the human rights and humane treatment of migrants regardless of their migration status. Civil society worldwide may congratulate itself on its successful push to have States recognize their enormous contribution to development, their vulnerable position and the abuses they suffer. States have recognized the fact that sustainable development cannot proceed without migrant workers whose rights and freedoms are respected.

Sadly, despite this recognition in the SDGs, commensurate legal protection at the national level lags far behind and migrants remain marginalized and vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination and human rights abuses. MFA calls on States to incorporate the provisions under international law guaranteeing migrants their rights into domestic legislation to protect migrants from the abuses they face daily.

The SDGs also remind us of another, darker connection between migration and development. It is a reminder of the ugly root causes of migration, whereby an unequal and exploitative international economic and financial system has driven people abroad. Ceaseless and haphazard liberalization and the dismantlement of social security systems have rendered the global poor ever more vulnerable to a volatile global market. The resulting crises of poverty, inequality and lack of opportunity have increasingly forced people to resort to migration. MFA seconds the call of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants for all States to prioritize addressing these root causes.

Wealthy destination countries must acknowledge their responsibility for migration flows. The demand for cheap -and often, exploited- labour is a fundamental, albeit unspoken and unrecognised, driver of migration. The continued denial of this fact, and immigration policy designed to force migrants into irregular channels drives and tacitly condones their exploitation.

25th Anniversary of the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families

International Migrants Day this year is also an occasion to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the UN Convention on Migrants' Rights (CMW), and the 40th anniversary of ILO convention 143. Convention 143 set out minimum human rights protections for all migrants, and the CMW built on this to further recognize and guarantee respect for the dignity and rights of all migrants. The CMW was an important step forward in states conceiving of migrants not as economic pawns, but as humans with commensurate rights. The Convention recognized their particular vulnerability, and guaranteed them a minimum level of protection. It recognized that fundamental human rights from the Universal Bill of Human Rights were legitimately held by all migrant workers, regardless of national origin or immigration status.

MFA recognises those States that have signed and ratified the CMW, and calls upon all other States, in particular countries of destination, to "Step It Up!" and do the same. MFA started the "Step It Up" campaign to addresses the immediate need for more States to sign and ratify the CMW: it is disappointing that a treaty that merely reaffirm and complement fundamental human rights guaranteed to all humans by the ICCPR and ICESCR to vulnerable migrants should have ratifications from only 48 state parties, with very few destination countries. Given that migrants are extremely vulnerable to human rights' abuses, it is unfortunate that wealthy states that pontificate on human rights should balk at the prospect of offering basic protections to those who need recognition of these rights the most. Migrant receiving states must finally take responsibility for the protection of the fundamental human rights of all people under their jurisdiction and ratify the Convention.

A Framework to Guide Responses to Current Crises

2015 has been a year of migration crises that have exposed the discrimination and xenophobia that still underlie discourse on migration. Unprecedented flows of refugees facing violence and persecution have braved extremely dangerous journeys in the Mediterranean and Andaman seas but have been met with, at best, a confused and misguided response, and at worst, outright hostility and xenophobia. In Southeast Asia, States forced sick and starving people packed into boats back to sea, while in Europe, States set about sealing their borders and meeting refugees with police lines. The crises have forced the world to confront the unresolved contradictions of international obligations and a persistent fortress mentality.

In this time of crisis, we urge people and governments around the world to remember that there is indeed a framework, built decades ago, that can guide our response to current challenges. The ICCPR and ICESCR, now 50 years old, and the CMW, now 25, lay out broadly accepted principles that must be upheld now, more than ever before. The protection of human rights is meaningless if it is not upheld for those who need it most. Human rights are universal, indivisible, inalienable and interdependent, and it is to international human rights standards that we must therefore look in our response to today's crises. As we at long last recognize migrants' contributions in the SDGs, we must recall the spirit of the international instruments that require us to recognize migrants as human beings with agency, dignity, and rights.

MFA, its members and partners are celebrating international migrants' day across the Asia by organizing a number of activities with migrant communities and members of their families. To know more about the activities of MFA and its partners for International Migrants Day please check the step it up website: <http://cmw25.org/migrants-campaign-month-2015/>

In Brief

Another Spate of Pre-CNY Accidents?: Nine workers were killed in workplace accidents in January (*Aw Cheng Wei, "Spate of worksite deaths sparks safety blitz", "Straits Times", 2nd February 2016*). The Ministry of Manpower was reported to be intending to send inspectors to 500 sites over the next four weeks to check on workplace safety.

In 2015, there was a spate of accidents early in the year that was ascribed in part to contractors hurrying to get jobs finished before Chinese New Year. In the article cited above, Singapore Contractors Association president, Kenneth Loo, appealed to his association's members "not to cut corners" and said, "Historically, there's a rush to finish work during the festive season," thus implying that the spike in accidents may well be due to similar reasons to that of last year.

The article only mentions the nationality of one worker, but the details of where the accidents took place (Four on construction sites, three in the marine sector and two deaths of cleaners) suggest that all the victims of fatal workplace accidents were migrant workers.

Migrant Worker Numbers: Another figure for a group of migrant workers in Singapore emerged as a result of the extensive coverage of release of the news that 27 Bangladeshi workers had been arrested in November 2015 on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks back in their home country.

The High Commissioner of Bangladesh, Mahbub Uz Zaman, "said about 160,000 Bangladeshis work in Singapore's construction and marine sectors." (*Aw Cheng Wei and Nilanjana Gupta, "Workers fear stigma and losing their job", "Straits Times", 22nd January 2016*).



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