

# Literature review: foreign maid

Literature



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The problem of maid abuse has been around for a long time, and is no longer new to us. There have been several cases of extreme maid abuse shown in the news through the years. The debate has been further sparked up by the case of Ng Hua Chye, a 47-year-old male tour guide, who was sentenced to more than 18 years' jail and 12 strokes of the cane for manslaughter after his Indonesian maid died following nine months of beatings which left more than 200 injuries. However, these are cases are only a few out of the many that have yet to be uncovered. Are there better ways to improve the working standards of maids?

This review aims to look into this problem through the comparison and analysis of several sources that we have managed to get our hands on. This review aims to identify the problems faced by foreign domestic workers in Singapore, whether maid abuse is indeed widespread, and finally what are the possible measures that can be taken to curb these problems effectively. Is maid abuse a widespread problem in Singapore? Cases of maid abuse are hard to track. ' Given their isolation in private homes, it is difficult to ascertain the exact proportion of migrant domestic workers who face abuse. (Human RightsWatch) However, an independent poll by Singapore Press Holdings in Dec 2003, revealed that ' over 80% of FDWs were happy to work in Singapore. ' (Getforme) This leaves us with a question: Are the statistics given by the government accurate in evaluating the problem of maid abuse? It can be further argued that the results of the polls are not representative of the whole foreign domestic workers population at large. Moreover, most foreign domestic workers who are abused would not be outside answering interviews by the government.

Thus, the results of the polls are not accurate in showing the problem of maid abuse in Singapore. Of course, abuse is definitely not confined to serious physical abuse only. ““ We only know about the extreme cases of abuse,” [TWC2 member Constance Singam] said, citing everyday practices like getting maids to wash the car, work long hours and wake up to feed someone coming home late. Employers also keep passports and withhold wages. ’ This goes to show that mundane forms of maid abuse and general ill treatment of maids are left unnoticed.

As quoted by TWC2 (The Working Committee 2) member Constance Singam, “ Physical abuse was only the tip of the iceberg, with the mundane problems of the domestic workers largely ignored. ” This statement is further supported by reports which show stunning statistics. ‘ Out of 147 cases of abuse [The Working Committee 2] studied, 68 percent involved physical injuries. ’ Physical abuse is rampant amongst cases of maid abuse, while there is also a large portion of foreign domestics workers in Singapore that suffer other ‘ mundane types of abuse’.

Thus, we can conclude from the evidence given above that maid abuse is indeed a widespread problem in the Singapore society. Problems that foreign domestic workers (FDWs) face Maids in Singapore face many problems, as asserted by the HRW. Women migrant domestic workers in Singapore suffer grave abuses ‘ including physical and sexual violence, food deprivation, and confinement in the workplace. ’, ‘ Migrant domestic workers earn half the wages of Singaporean workers in similar occupations, such as cleaners or gardeners. Unpaid wages is a growing complaint. And that ‘ authorities have excluded domestic workers from the country's main labor laws. ’ (HRW)

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However, Getforme disagrees by saying, ' Foreign domestic workers receive full protection under Singapore's laws, including the Employment of Foreign Workers Act. All employers must provide adequate rest and meals and ensure work safety, proper housing and prompt salary payment. ' (Getforme) Although it is evident that the Singapore government has tried to protect the welfare of foreign domestic workers, whether employers and employment agencies will follow suit is a different case.

Studies conducted by the Human Rights Watch have shown that foreign domestic workers have more problems that do not meet our eyes. As quoted by the HRW, ' key labor conditions, such as wages, hours of work, and salary deductions are left to employers and agencies, while domestic workers have little or no bargaining power. ' Foreign domestic workers in Singapore also suffer from economic problems. Apart from physical abuse by their employers, many of them have to pay huge debts to the employment agencies.

HRW shows this problem in its article, ' Many domestic workers labor without pay for months to settle debts to employment agencies,' Second, many of these FDWs lost their freedom as they were ' confined to their workplace', claimed HRW. Some employers prevent domestic workers from having weekly rest days, forbid them from talking to neighbors, and sometimes lock them in the workplace to prevent them from running away or having boyfriends. All these facts disagree with the Ministry of Manpower, which states that all employers must provide adequate rest and meals and ensure work safety, proper housing and prompt salary payment.

Ultimately, it does not matter what the government does, as the people who have actual contact with the FDWs are the employers and the employment agencies, who are often the ones to make lives difficult for FDWs. Therefore, we do not believe it wrong to say that the problems that domestic workers face are indeed very serious. Solutions to curb maid abuse So, what are ways that can curb the problem of maid abuse more efficiently and improve the standards of working maids?

There are some resolutions stated in our sources, while there are conflicting views at the same time. The HRW proposes that Singapore follow the example of Hong Kong in terms of their treatment of FDWs, ' where the law stipulates a minimum wage and at least one rest day a week, the Singapore government does not provide a standard contract for maids. ' (TWC2) However the Ministry disagrees with this arrangement as it is impractical to lay down minimum standards of working conditions due to the FDWs' ' unique nature of employment' in households.

Moreover, the introduction of such a standard will ' inconvenience many households', for example households with the elderly and need constant care from the domestic workers. However, the MOM has indeed taken several measures to protect the welfare of domestic workers. These include creating mandatory orientation programs for employers and domestic workers, prosecuting cases of unpaid wages and physical abuse, as well as introducing an accreditation program for employment agencies. The MOM has paid particular attention to the prosecution of cases involving unpaid wages and physical abuse. Employers who breach work permit conditions can be punished with a fine of up to \$5, 000 and a jail term of up to 6

months as quoted by the MOM. Also, employment agencies are to ensure that employers are to have at least 8 years of education such that they understand '[FDW's] rights and protection provided under Singapore law.' Therefore, it will be very wrong to say that the Singapore government has not provided with measures to curb the problem of maid abuse. However, are these measures enough to curb maid abuse?

Although, the cases of maid abuse have been decreasing, the cases have become more serious. The Ng Hua Chye case happened after the Singapore government enforced stricter penalties. Moreover, there is no way to be sure that the employers and employment agencies do know if households are going by the law. A ministry spokesman said that as domestic workers 'work in a home environment, which varies from household to household, it would be difficult to enforce any coverage under the Employment Act.' Thus, it is clear to us that prosecution is not enough to solve the problem.

Certain governmental policies which pertain to FDW and their employers, act as double-edged swords. They could be changed or abolished for the better lives of maids in Singapore. A fine example of such a policy would be the S\$5, 000 security bond imposed on employers who hire migrant workers. Purposed to control illegal immigration as well as to ensure employers have sufficient money to pay their maids their due salaries during their employment period, this policy directly led to employer's restricting their migrant workers' movements, as they will have to forfeit S\$5, 000 if their maids run away.

Some employers even go to the extent to give their maids no weekly rest days and limited freedom of movement (e. g. locking them up at home). Other policies such as the monthly levy of approximately S\$200-295 which employers of domestic workers have to pay also directly or indirectly result in the deprivation of the rights of migrant workers. In this case, not a cent from the money collected by the Singapore government in a stated attempt to regulate unskilled labor migration is used to provide better services for the migrant workers.

Thus, modifying governmental policies for the benefit of FDW can also serve as a potential solution. Conclusion In conclusion, the problem of maid abuse is widespread in our society, as domestic workers in Singapore suffer from a variety of abuses and problem, ranging from physical abuse to financial problems. However, governmental policies are not effective enough to curb the problem of maid abuse, as it is difficult to enforce the law in every household.

Moreover, laws are to protect the interests of victims, not just to punish those who broke the law. Thus, more actions has to be done to solve the problem as it has been proved that deterrence is not exactly effective enough to protect the welfare of domestic workers. Therefore, we believe that the problem of maid abuse is serious, that domestic workers do face many problems, and that governmental policies are effective in solving these problems only to a small extent.

## References

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