

## **No maid-to-order situation**

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Review - Others

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INDONESIANS, many believe, make the best maids. They are uncomplaining, mild-mannered and obedient. They are also cheaper to hire than Filipinas, who have a tendency to 'talk back'.

Except that they are getting more difficult to find because of requirements that maids should be above 23, have at least eight years of schooling and be able to pass an English-language proficiency test.

About 60 per cent of the 180,000 maids here are Indonesians, says Association of Employment Agencies of Singapore (Aeas) president Abdul Jalil Aliyar Razzy. Since 2005, when those requirements kicked in, the number of biodatas, or documents profiling potential maid candidates, that maid agents get from Indonesia has dropped by 70 to 80 per cent.

While the supply is not quite drying up, maid recruiters are wary of the risks of bringing over the women. A survey of 20 maid agents says that bringing over an Indonesian maid costs \$2,000, twice the amount a year ago.

Indonesian maid recruiters, who share a portion of this sum with agents, say it is to cover airfare, training, meals, lodging - and 'unique Singapore requirements' like English lessons. Recruiter Asih Rahayu of PT Handalan in Jakarta says: 'Lessons cost money. Just imagine the costs we have to bear if she fails her English test and has to be sent back?'

Maids under 23 are sent to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and the Middle East, where the minimum age is 21.

An agency, Angellink, claims it turns away two to three potential employers a day because they wish to hire only Indonesians. The English test is difficult and it is not uncommon to see Indonesians in tears before sitting for their tests. There is no breakdown by nationality but the Manpower Ministry (MOM) says that more than 95 per cent of first-time maids pass the entry test.

Maid agents want the rules eased. But we should remember why the rules were introduced in the first place: to raise the quality of maids and to protect them.

It is the obedient Indonesian maid who seems to get the short end of the stick from Singapore employers. Language barriers can in fact aggravate relationships in the household, resulting in abuse.

One other way to get more domestic workers is to hire from non-traditional sources. Besides Indonesia and the Philippines, women from Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Thailand can work here as maids. But Aeas, which represents more than 400 agents, thinks the list is not long enough.

Mr Abdul Jalil told The Straits Times that Aeas submitted a request to MOM last September for permission to hire from Cambodia, where people have few dietary restrictions and are mostly Buddhists, like many Singaporeans.

Agents cite as an example Malaysia, which hires maids from Laos, Nepal and Vietnam. So why can't Singapore?

It looks like an easy enough solution but we should consider the effect of having someone from a different culture working in the home. We hired maids from China some years ago before quietly stopping it.

Mr Jolovan Wham, the executive director of foreign workers' welfare group Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics, thinks it is not a question of where maids come from but how the host country treats them.

'No matter from which country we source domestic workers, if we don't treat them well, the worker will not want to work here. We should not be having this attitude: Filipinas talk back and are rebellious, so we don't want them.'

Filipinas are the second choice among employers here. But Singapore is not the first choice of Filipinas either. Only one-third of the maids here are Filipinas.

Why work here for \$380 a month when employers in Hong Kong and Taiwan will pay twice that sum? Households seeking maids might well have to pay market rates. They might have to offer other employment 'benefits' too, such as days off, if they want to compete for their share of maids.

Unifem Singapore president Saleemah Ismail believes there is no lack of women in the region wanting to work as domestic helpers. But they know their rights - such as fair wages and days off - and they are turning to countries that grant them those rights.

Singapore households are not the only maid employers in the region. There are employers elsewhere who pay maids better - and treat them better too.

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