

UN campaigns for Singapore maids to get day off

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By Yvonne Cheong

SINGAPORE, April 29 (Reuters Life!) - A year into her job as a domestic worker for a Singaporean family, Aloha mustered the courage to ask for a regular day off. Her employer said no.

"Sometimes, if I want to go to church, I cannot go out, because I have no day off," said 29-year-old Aloha, who left her home in the Philippines to work in Singapore.

The United Nations thinks a regular day off is a basic right and on Thursday will launch its "Day Off" campaign in Singapore to press home this point. The goal is for this to become one day off a week.

The campaign is not the only pressure the government is facing on maids.

Maid agencies in the city state fear an exodus, as offers of twice the pay and a compulsory day off lure its maids overseas, the local Straits Times newspaper said on Monday.

Indonesian and Sri Lankan maids are paid S\$280 (\$205) a month in Singapore, and Filipinas up to S\$350 (\$256).

That is less than half what they can earn in Hong Kong and Taiwan, where employers pay \$506 and \$550 respectively.

About half of Singapore's 170,000 foreign maids are believed to have no rest day at all, according to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), which is leading the campaign to urge employers to voluntarily give a day off.

Domestic workers are currently not included in the country's employment act, which guarantees one day off each week by law.

Organisers said common employer reasons for not giving a day off include fears the worker might get pregnant or practical considerations, such as an employer's elderly parent needing constant minding.

"We hope to allay these fears and burst the bubbles of myth," said Saleemah Ismail, president of UNIFEM Singapore, in a statement on Tuesday.

"In time perhaps the campaign will encourage employers to give their domestic worker a day off a week, the same benefit they enjoy at their workplace."

Another domestic worker, who declined to be named for fear of losing her job, said she had not had a day off in three years.

"I wake up at 6 o'clock then I sleep at 9 (at night) ... No off day," the 32-year-old Filipina told Reuters. "My employer asked me 'why you ask me for a off day -- for what?'"

The affluent Southeast Asian city-state is one of the world's top employers of maids.

Currently about one in six households has a domestic worker to cook, clean and care for children or elderly relatives, with richer families sometimes employing two maids.

An industry association put together a standard contract two years ago requiring employers to give their domestic workers at least one day off a month, but campaigners say it has loopholes.

"There's a get-out clause where employers can pay in lieu of the day off, and even then, there is a chance of getting around that," John Gee, president of non-governmental organisation Transient Workers Count Too, told Reuters.

Aloha agreed to be paid S\$30 a month on top of her S\$320 salary for not having a rest day, but now she does not have the option of changing her contract. "Sometimes, I feel

homesick, I want to talk to somebody," she told reporters. (\$1 = 1.360 Singapore dollar)
(Editing by Neil Chatterjee and David Fogarty)