

Civic groups campaign for maids' day-off

STIMES0020080429e44u0000w

Singapore

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723 Words

30 April 2008

Straits Times

English

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CIVIL society groups are renewing efforts to get employers of maids to give them at least one day off each month.

The groups are embarking on a year-long publicity campaign calling on employers to give the estimated 180,000 maids here their days of rest.

The joint campaign by three non-governmental organisations - the National Committee for the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem) Singapore, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) and the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home) - will kick off tomorrow with the launch of the website dayoff.sg.

This will feature suggestions on how employers can make lifestyle adjustments so that their maids can get time off and list enrichment courses that such workers can take up on their rest days.

Other activities planned for the year: dialogues with students, and media advertisements to raise public awareness.

Said Unifem Singapore president Saleemah Ismail: 'Over time, we hope that it will become second nature for employers to give their maids rest days, just like what they enjoy at their own workplaces.'

Foreign domestic workers here are excluded from Singapore's Employment Act, which stipulates minimum days off and maximum weekly working hours.

They are, however, covered under Work Permit regulations that require all employers to look after their workers' well-being, including providing them with proper housing and adequate rest.

The current campaign marks the first time civil society groups are collaborating on this issue.

TWC2 has been championing the cause since 2003. Then known as The Working Committee 2, it sent a report to the Manpower Ministry advocating, among other things, legislation requiring employers to give their maids at least two days off every month.

The ministry has, however, eschewed legislation, preferring a reconciliatory to a litigious approach.

In 2006, the Association of Employment Agencies and CaseTrust, the arm of the Consumers Association of Singapore (Case) that accredits maid agencies, came out with a standard maid employment contract that stipulates a compulsory day off every month or cash in lieu. The three NGOs are, however, against the offer of cash in lieu, arguing that days off are a basic right.

They add that despite the contracts, reports of maids being denied sufficient rest continue to surface.

The Indonesian Embassy here said it receives around 30 phone calls daily from maids complaining that they do not get a day off - roughly the same number as before the standard contracts were implemented.

Said Mr Arsi Juga, the embassy's Third Secretary for consular affairs who handles maid-

related issues: 'Many domestic workers remain unaware that they have the right to ask for a day off or cash in lieu. Some are simply too afraid to ask.'

A spokesman for the Manpower Ministry said the campaign is 'in line' with its own efforts to ensure that foreign domestic workers get adequate rest.

Over the years, the ministry has taken steps to enhance the protection and support of maids. The minimum age for maids has been raised from 18 to 23, and first-time employers must now attend a course on how to treat maids.

'We are committed to ensuring that the interests and welfare of all foreign workers, including foreign domestic workers, are safeguarded while they are working in Singapore,' the spokesman said.

Figures from the Manpower Ministry indicate that only four in 10,000 maids here have reported abuse of any sort by their employers.

Mr John Gee of TWC2 said he detected a 'certain level of wariness' on the part of the Government in dealing with the day-off issue, even though the latter dealt with maid abuse cases very efficiently.

Employer resistance could explain why it was against legislating days off, he said.

IT engineer Jason Chua is one such employer. He makes it a point to give his Filipino maid of three years her days off but wants to retain flexibility in doing so.

Said the 38-year-old, who lives with his wife and ailing mother in a four-room flat in Bedok:

'My maid knows my mother's daily needs very well, so we need her around often. But whenever we have time on weekends, she is free to go.'

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