

Singapore groups to push for maids' day off

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SINGAPORE, April 30, 2008 (AFP) -

Advocacy groups in Singapore have joined forces to launch on Thursday a call for foreign maids to get a regular day off.

Singapore in 2006 ruled out giving domestic helpers mandatory rest days, saying it would be inconvenient.

In a joint statement, the advocacy groups said about 170,000 migrant women work as maids in Singapore but only 50 percent were believed to get a regular day off, according to a 2003 newspaper poll which they cited.

"What we hope to see in the course of this campaign is... a shift of mindset, so that more employers do see giving a regular day off as a fair thing to do," John Gee, president of migrant workers' advocacy group Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), told AFP.

His group is working on the campaign with two other non-governmental groups, The Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), which provides a shelter and other services for needy migrants workers, and UNIFEM Singapore, the national committee of the United Nations Development Fund for Women.

"This is a strong coalition, with the potential to reach out much further than any earlier campaign," Gee said on Wednesday.

In 2006, the bodies which accredit maid agencies introduced a standard employment contract which provides for rest days but gives maids the option of choosing compensation instead.

Gee said the contract has made little difference and that denial of a day off remains "a big problem".

As part of their effort, the groups have launched a website, <http://www.dayoff.sg> which offers information for maids as well as a section addressing common concerns which it says employers have about giving their helpers a rest day.

Among the concerns cited is that the maid will "mix with bad company, have a boyfriend, slacken in her work".

Singapore's Ministry of Manpower said the day off campaign is in line with its own efforts to ensure maids get adequate rest.

Most of the city-state's maids come from Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.

Their counterparts in Hong Kong are, by law, granted one day off every week and public holidays.