

NGOs say more can be done to help duped foreign workers

CNEWS0020080905e4950005I

958 Words

05 September 2008

03:08 GMT

Channel NewsAsia

English

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SINGAPORE: They were promised well-paying jobs as waitresses in Singapore, food and lodging all paid for; all they needed to do was to buy an air ticket. But when Rosa, 28, and Gabrielle, 26, (not their real names) arrived in Singapore, they were whisked from the airport to a bar in Tanjong Katong and were told to entertain men.

"We were shocked. The girls were acting like prostitutes. We thought we would be working as waitresses," said Rosa.

Stories of unscrupulous labour agents promising foreign workers lucrative jobs in Singapore are not new.

In July, The Daily Express, a newspaper in Sabah, reported how a group of Sabahan young men and women ended up doing menial jobs in the Republic.

One of them, a 21-year-old Sabahan, told the paper that he was promised a job in the hotel sector, but he ended up being forced to clean septic tanks and was given only one meal a day.

The youth claimed that some 70 Sabahan youths, including about 20 girls, were facing a similar predicament.

Why, despite Singapore's strict labour laws, are we still hearing stories of foreign workers being duped into coming to Singapore?

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that TODAY spoke to said these people - usually from rural areas - are not very educated and naive.

If this is the case, is there any way Singapore can better inform foreign workers about the work conditions here?

What about host countries, such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Bangladesh - are they doing enough to educate their citizens about the market conditions in Singapore?

The Philippine government seems most proactive in this respect.

It has a special agency, the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency, that is tasked with deploying Filipino workers overseas.

The agency has units which investigate and prosecute illegal recruiters.

Under Philippine law, illegal recruitment is a criminal act and punishable by imprisonment and/or fine.

According to the Philippine Ambassador to Singapore, Ms Belen Fule-Anota, the embassy constantly reminds its local government units to be vigilant against illegal job recruiters and agencies.

And while its efforts are commendable, the Philippine government has found it hard educating its citizens that most will not qualify for Singapore's employment schemes and that the work promised by illegal recruiters are just a sham - hence stories like Rosa's and Gabrielle continue to be told.

It doesn't help that many who have been duped are unwilling to make a police report.

"Women who have trafficked into the sex trade just want to go home. They are scared to make a police report because they are afraid that the syndicates will harm them or their

family members," said Ms Saleemah Ismail, president of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem) Singapore.

Another reason according to Ms Bridget Liew, founder and president of Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics, is that a police investigation would mean that they would have to stay back to give evidence in court.

"This could take a few months to a year depending on the case. In the mean time, the women languish at a shelter as they can't find work," explained Ms Liew.

In April this year, Nominated MP Eunice Olsen asked Mr Gan Kim Yong, the Acting Minister for Manpower, what was being done to prevent rogue agents from duping foreign workers into coming to Singapore, and whether those who have been duped are considered to have committed any offence and therefore treated as criminals.

Mr Gan replied that the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) will revoke the licences of employment agencies found to be involved in such scams.

Agencies operating without a licence will be charged under the Employment Agencies Act and fined up to S\$5,000; repeat offenders can be fined up to S\$10,000, jailed up to six months, or both.

"If investigations reveal that victims of such scams unknowingly overstayed or worked illegally, they will not be prosecuted. Instead, they will be issued Special Passes and allowed to work under MOM's Temporary Jobs Scheme," he said.

Foreign nationals required as prosecution witnesses will also be issued with Special Passes to remain in Singapore, and allowed to participate in the Temporary Jobs Scheme.

The MOM will also be sharing information on such scams with the embassies of the countries involved, so that they can help warn their nationals against unscrupulous employment agencies in their home countries, Mr Gan said.

However, several NGO officials say that illegal construction workers are more likely to seek redress if they can apply for a Special Pass and work while they testify against their errant employment agency.

It is harder for women who have been duped to identify agents or syndicates since these businesses are shady and most probably not registered.

Moreover, these women have to deal with the trauma of sexual abuse, the burden of debt and the fear that their family members may be in harm's way. The last thing they want to do is to prolong their stay in Singapore.

According to Ms Saleemah: "It would help if our police were trained to be deal with women who have been trafficked, perhaps that might encourage them to bring charges against these syndicates."

President of Transient Workers Count Two, Mr John Gee, suggests that greater coordination between home and recipient countries is needed to address the problem of trafficking.

These include protection for witnesses, financial support for these trafficked victims, stepping-up anti-human trafficking laws and reducing poverty in the region.

On its part, MOM says it is working with all the relevant organisations to extend a helping hand to workers affected by unscrupulous employment agents. - /fa