

Maids deserve a day off, too

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It may not be enshrined in current laws but human relationships are not based on laws alone

THEY wouldn't let you out on Saturday to catch a movie with friends.

You pleaded, but it fell on deaf ears. 'But it's just one afternoon,' you told your parents. I am sure these youthful memories of bargaining for freedom are not exclusively mine. In fact, they are an uncanny parallel to the current debate on the freedom of foreign domestic workers here.

Last week, three civil society groups kicked off a year-long campaign to urge employers to give their maids at least one day off a month. The groups were the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem) Singapore, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) and the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home).

A poll of employers here five years ago showed that only half gave their maids a weekly or monthly day off. Cases of maids not given a single day off in two years are not unheard of, according to the non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

A few employers argue that some maids agreed contractually not to have a rest day, opting for compensation instead. Others say not giving maids rest days doesn't run afoul of the law.

But human relationships do not operate on laws alone. Are we a society so bound by rules that we are incapable of extending basic empathy to fellow human beings?

Under the Singapore Employment Act, local employees are guaranteed a day off a week by law. Yet many still lament that weekends are too short a reprieve from their office cubicles.

I am neither a parent nor an employer of a maid, so I may not fully comprehend the anxiety of letting my child's chief caregiver roam freely without supervision.

But as a youth, I remember the frustration of having my freedom curtailed.

So, I urge more youth to show compassion for our domestic workers.

Having been an overseas student, I understand how valuable time spent with fellow countrymen is when adapting to a foreign culture. Regular food gatherings with other overseas Singaporeans quelled homesickness and relieved stress from studies.

Perhaps anxious employers can start by enrolling their maids in courses along with other domestic workers.

NGOs and community centres can fill the demand by organising cooking, sewing or language classes.

Domestic workers can then have their day of rest while picking up useful skills at the same time.

Otherwise, freedom can be portioned as it sometimes is for youth, whose days out are lengthened as they prove themselves responsible and reliable.

Whether between an angsty teenager and a controlling parent, or between maid and employer, trust is fostered only by a desire to earn it on one side, and a willingness to let go on the other.

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