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Reminder: Maids are Human Beings too

Friday, Aug 01, 2008

Just as Yu Shan's European classmates have had an issue with Singapore's employment of foreign domestic workers, my American peers have often exclaimed "You have a maid?" While the employment of household domestic help has been a common practice for centuries worldwide, the prevalence in Singapore has been unmatched by other countries. One of the world's top employers of maids, Singapore has more than 150,000 migrant women working as foreign domestic workers. Most of these migrant workers originate from the Philippines and Indonesia, and a minority comes from Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and India. One in every six households in Singapore currently employs maids in their home. Capturing headlines and the attention of human rights advocacy groups have not been the unusually high rates of employment, but rather, the inadequate protection of labor laws, poor working conditions and all too frequent abuse cases.



Human Rights Watch has released a report, detailing the predicament of foreign domestic workers in Singapore. Excluded from the Employment Act, their labor rights are largely unprotected: there is little regulation on working hours, days off, wages, working conditions and accommodation. This has resulted in maids working for long hours everyday, with little sleep, 7 days a week. The wages, albeit higher than what they could have earned in their home country, is exploitive and many times lower than what a Singaporean would earn for the same tasks. With no regulation for days off, whether a maid ever steps out of her workplace in the 2 years of her contracted work is at pleasure of her employer. Because of this loophole, maids have been abused to death with no outlet or opportunity to seek help. In addition, maids interviewed by Human Rights Watch have experienced forced confinement and restricted communication. I am not surprised; I have often come across agents who advise employers to discourage their maids from socializing, to prevent them from falling susceptible to "bad influences" of their friends and becoming "troublesome" themselves. The act of calling home to talk to their families is also frowned upon, it is supposedly an expensive hobby which eats into their working time, gets them emotional, and often results in reasons to borrow money from employers. Deprivation of contact from friends and family are perhaps the mildest of complaints. As their employment and accommodation are in the privacy of their employer's homes, maids may be subject to sexual abuse, physical abuse and verbal abuse, news reports of extreme cases are not uncommon, and these are only the tip of the iceberg, since most cases go unreported. Unscrupulous employers may hold onto a portion of the maid's meager pay, or in some cases, all of it. Profit driven agents also impose exorbitant fees on maids, putting them in debt for months. In some cases, religious freedom is compromised as well. Muslim workers may be forced to handle and cook pork, or to take care of the household's pet dogs, both of which are against their religious practices. They may also be forbidden to wear their *tudung* headscarves or to pray as often as they would like (usually 5 times a day according to Islamic rules). Their rights to reproduction and marriage are signed away through clauses in their contract. From 1999 to 2005, 147 foreign domestic workers died, either from workplace accidents or suicides. It has been viewed as uncharacteristic for Singapore, a country renowned for its strict laws and regulations, to have imposed little legislation to protect the welfare, working conditions and rights of the maids. I disagree. Instead, I believe that it is a reflection of the larger problem, a general lack of consciousness in Singaporean society with regards to the respect, rights and dignity a human being deserves. As a result of the restrictions on public discourse, due to the general acceptance of the compromise on their rights, Singaporean society's maturity has been greatly stunted. Singapore's accelerated economic development, an Asian economic miracle, has greatly outpaced other societal progress. And it is perhaps this preoccupation with bread and butter issues and economic growth in the past decades that has dimmed the spotlight on other issues relevant to a developing society. Singaporeans may be enjoying sufficient wealth to employ maids, yet, they do not understand that maids have basic needs too. Singaporean society, as a whole, has yet to achieve the necessary maturity, freedom and platform to fully conceptualize the notion of human rights. "Day Off", a national campaign by UNIFEM Singapore, Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME) and Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), pushing for a day off every week for maids, recognizes this. They have stopped short of pushing for legislation change as they are aware that there is a lack of public understanding and support. With a lack of public support, the Ministry of Manpower can stick to its flawed argument: the implementation of such legislation may threaten to dent the credibility of the ministry as it may be difficult to enforce. Is the ministry going to shy away from any initiatives or legislation which may have a chance in being unsuccessful so as to protect their image? There will be no credibility to speak of if this was true. To knowingly leave loopholes which compromise on the most basic needs and rights of human beings for such superficial excuses is simply ridiculous. This is not merely a domestic problem; it has long term repercussions in the region. Singapore may have a less tarnished human rights record when compared to some of its South East Asian counterparts such as Cambodia, Thailand and East Timor. But it is important to note some behavior of employers in Singapore brink on slavery, which is a crime against humanity. It would almost be hypocritical for Singapore to call out its South East Asian counterpart's violation of human rights if the nationals of other ASEAN countries were subject to highly exploitive mistreatment in Singapore. Furthermore, this unhealthy relationship between some Singaporeans and a significant number of foreign domestic workers, mostly from South East Asian countries will serve to sow seeds of distrust within ASEAN. Having had a history of exploitation and mistreatment of human resources from its South East Asian neighbors, it may be difficult to make a convincing case for equal partnership in bilateral trade agreements. Cooperation in ASEAN's envisioned economic integration may also be diminished. It may be argued that these sentiments are not strong, as the sending countries do not currently have a strong notion on the concept of equal and inalienable rights either. Indeed, the sending countries, despite being aware of these problems, are not doing much. The Indonesian Embassy in Singapore receives an average of 50 calls a day from maids with complaints of mistreatment; should a runaway maid seek help at the embassy, they merely call her agent to take her away. Philippine authorities, on the other hand, have recognized this problem and have institutionalized means of protection into recruitment and placement systems. Benign neglect simply because the victims' voices are currently not loud enough is a very short sighted attitude to adopt. To change its labor laws with regards to foreign domestic workers only when the issues are brought up by sending countries through formal diplomatic channels, would be

too late. By the time Indonesia and the Philippines are completely outraged by the treatment of their countrymen, the soured ties would be difficult to repair. To be fair, abuse of power has almost become a norm in society. The tendency to exploit subordinates in the case of maid mistreatment is heightened by the privacy of their own homes and the foreign domestic workers' lack of protection. Similar cases have surfaced in Taiwan and Hong Kong as well. However, in a country in which an individual's rights and freedom of speech and assembly are respected, the maids have a louder voice than their counterparts in Singapore. Maids in Hong Kong have recently taken to the streets to march in protest against unfair changes in labor policies, a luxury which even Singapore citizens themselves are unable to enjoy. Even within the European Union, au pairs have also been subjected to exploitation. Interestingly enough, the job title au pair is derived from the French term for on par, to denote an equal status between employer and employee. However, the degree of exploitation in Europe is very much lesser, as labor laws in the EU are extremely stringent and respectful of human rights. The pervasiveness and degree of abuse in Singapore is grave and ought to be seriously dealt with. For the richest country of the South East Asian region to deal with foreign domestic helpers in an irresponsible and inhumane manner sets a poor example for its peers.

Author: Lan Shioh Tsai

About the author:

Lan Shioh is an International Relations major of the Class of 2010 at Brown University and an intern at Singapore Institute of International Affairs. In addition to feeling strongly for the rights of foreign domestic workers, she has also been a strong advocate of the rights of house elves. Along with Hermione, she has been a fierce champion of The Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare (SPEW).

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Comments

Maids are human beings too

Submitted by Anonymous on 9 November 2008 - 8:18am.

I have supported my friend to move from Indonesia to Singapore as a maid thinking this would be a step in a better life for her. The reports she gives about the way she is treated and about the far worse treatment of many other Indonesian women by Singaporean employers have shocked me greatly. Having been to Singapore several times, I had thought your country was a modern country much like European ones. My view is now that the treatment and rights of maids in Singapore is an outrage! It is time Singaporeans look to the core values in its society : bullying, mistreatment, injustice and racism should form no part of it. It is time UK and American Universities operating in Singapore also raised their voices!

Jonathan

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Maids are Human Beings too

Submitted by Anonymous on 21 October 2008 - 12:06am.

Shioh Tsai, I would suggest that you come down from your high pedestal and get a grip on life. There are several maids in Singapore covorting with other male foreign workers and giving their employers a headache. The maids are more protected than the employers. So the next time you want to talk about human rights, go over to Singapore with your eyes wide open and see for yourself.

Daniel.

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MAID ABUSE

Submitted by Anonymous on 16 November 2008 - 8:02pm.

I wonder why all singaporeans very concerned about maids personal life. Just have a look at what singaporean youth does all around. In mrt's , public places kissing and hugging each other . None are concerned about that. I know a filipino house maid who changed employer 3 times i 2 years. why? First employer is a taxi driver . He used to show her porn on internet and touch her. She runs away and scared everytime when she is alone in house. Finally she changed employer. Then three months went on well. Her new employer forced her to have sex with her and told her that he pay \$50. After that changed again . Now her employer is a pilipina too . What this employer does, She send her maid to part time job to one of her neighbour. The neighbour is a proffessor in a university. He openly asked her to make love to him and offered money. Maid informed about this to her employer . The employer suggest her to be his girl friend and earn some extra money and give half of the money to her. Wow singaporeans.

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