

Why maids' rights should matter to us

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In pursuing a better life, the hopes of migrant women and their employers could well coincide.

This is because “issues for women in Singapore include those facing Foreign Domestic Workers”, said Ms Trina Liang-Lin (inset), president of the non-profit UN Women Singapore (unwomen-nc.org.sg), formerly known as Unifem Singapore.

Explaining, Ms Liang-Lin pointed out that the “No 1” challenge for women in Singapore is achieving work-life balance. And any drastic change in the number of FDWs “would affect our work-life balance”. One need only look to Malaysia, she noted, after Indonesia banned its citizens from taking up new jobs as maids following cases of mistreatment by Malaysian employers.

“I think having FDWs in Singapore makes it a Singapore issue to give them what rights we believe we ourselves should have – and one of these rights, which we strongly believe in, is a day off,” said Ms Liang-Lin in an interview for International Women’s Day. UN Women Singapore is co-authoring a com-



Ms Trina Liang-Lin with a group of girls working as domestic helpers in Nepal where children as young as five work as maids. PHOTO COURTESY UN WOMEN SINGAPORE

ing report on employers’ attitudes towards FDWs having a day off and today officially launches Project Inspire, a search for a project aimed at improving the lives of women and children.

Of the roughly S\$500,000 in funds raised by the organisation each year, about 80 per cent goes to projects in developing countries in the region and the rest to Singapore-based projects, said Ms Liang-Lin, a 40-year-old investment banker.

“Reduced mortality rates, lack of access to primary school education and basic health-care and being caught in conflict areas (are some) situations that Singaporean women are blessed not to be caught in ... The more desperate situations are just a few tens of kilometres away from us,” she said. The group, for instance, has completed anti-trafficking programmes in Batam and currently works to curb domestic violence in Aceh.

CORPORATE REGRESSION?

While women in Singapore may be generally better placed than their sisters in developing countries, there has nonetheless been a lack of progress as reflected in the number of women on the boards of companies and organisations here.

“It’s actually gone down in the last 10

years or so,” said Ms Liang-Lin, who has held director or executive-director positions in a number of global investment banks. One sometimes finds the “same women” serving on several boards, she noted.

Boards in Norway have a female representation of 37.9 per cent; the figure is at 10 per cent in Australia and 8.9 per cent in Hong Kong, with Singapore trailing in at 5.6 per cent, according to figures tabulated by BoardAgender, an initiative to be launched tomorrow by the Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations.

Ms Liang-Lin noted that parts of her industry – like her own domain, investment banking – are “still very much a men’s world”. There are more women in private banking, for instance, which is more service-oriented, whereas in investment banking “you’re reacting more to the markets than to people”, said the managing director at Templebridge Investments.

Ms Liang-Lin, who lost her mother at a young age and hails from a middle-class background, told TODAY she feels the need to give back to a society in which women have far more opportunities than before.

“I was very fortunate for all the opportunities that came my way despite a challenging start in life and despite being a woman. I think this ‘fairy tale’ could really only happen in my generation, not in my mother’s or grandmother’s.” ■

Venessa Lee is a correspondent at TODAY.

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