



Newsletter – November 2021

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Our Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs)

FDWs are part of the Singapore Workforce for many years. In fact, for many of us they are part of our families at home. This situation can also be found in other countries with similar causes and consequences. The two main reasons for employing a FDW are a rapidly aging population and dual-income families. A newspaper article dated 4 November 2019 stated that in 2010 there were 201, 000 FDWs in Singapore and this figure rose to 255,800 as of June 2019. The FDWs are from our neighbouring countries such as Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Hence, the treatment and care of FDWs has an important political and international dimension to it that the Singapore Government has to tackle tactfully.

The Ministry of Manpower website in Singapore states that “As an employer, you are responsible for the health and well-being of your foreign domestic worker (FDW). You must provide for rest days, proper accommodation, adequate medical care and safe work conditions.” It further adds that the FDW is entitled to a weekly rest day (law after 1 January 2013). The day is to be decided by both parties and if no day is given an extra 1 day’s salary in lieu of the rest day shall be given to the FDW.

The reader can readily appreciate the difficulty that FDWs face in adapting to a foreign environment. When the writer went for a holiday to Japan, being Singaporean, he was frustrated when he could not find a dust-bin to throw his rubbish. There was no dust-bin in sight though he was in the middle of a city. What more for a foreign worker in Singapore where the climate is not so consoling and the cost of living is very high. They have to adjust to the local culture and customs and a fast-paced environment. And there is the language barrier though some manage to adapt well. Many of them are not familiar with the laws of Singapore as expected and the fact that our laws are many and complex is a further mountain to climb.

A number of FDWs are problems themselves. After, they have arrived in Singapore employers soon realize that some of them have chronic illnesses. Others are incompetent or negligent. Some resort to stealing or abusing those under their care. It

is also common for some FDWs to have affairs with other foreigners or local men while working in Singapore.

The present Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation in Singapore. As the borders are closed to most of the countries from where the FDWs come, the FDWs are separated from their families and are unable to visit their children or parents. The flow of FDWs to Singapore from these countries are further restricted resulting in unbearable increase in the cost of hiring these FDWs. The cost of transfers of FDWs between employers has also skyrocketed.

The misery of FDWs is further increased by abusive employers. ChannelNewsAsia reported that over a period from 2017 to 2020, an average of 270 physical abuse cases against FDWs per year have been reported to the authorities. Physical abuse ranges from overworked hours to assault, and even starvation and death. Needless to say, verbal abuse is also common. Here are two past cases in Singapore:

Case 1

Piang Ngaih Don

24 year old Piang Ngaih Don from Myanmar died in 2016 from a brain injury inflicted by her employers. Amongst the abusive actions were attacking her with a broom and metal ladle, stomping on her while she was on the floor and her employers burned her forehead with a hot iron.

Case 2

Sulsi Setyowati

24 year old Sulsi Setyowati is from Indonesia. In December 2017, she started working for her employers. Her employer spit, slapped and dragged Sulsi by her hair when she forgot to apply ointment on her employer's child's stomach. This abuse, amongst others, continued after her employer found out that Sulsi had posted online the pictures of her employer's children. Sulsi finally escaped at about 2am one day through the balcony by climbing down 15 floors from the balcony. The front door of the flat was locked at that time.

[Above cases taken from "Coconuts Singapore" dated 8 October 2021].

FDWs are a great help to most Singaporean families. They provide the timely assistance needed by these families like looking after the children, cleaning the home and taking care of the elderly and the sick and aged members of the family or even providing assistance at their employers' offices. Some employers treat their FDW as their own daughter or sibling. A number of FDWs take up courses such as in bakery, cooking and tailoring. Many of them are eager and ready to learn English Language.

Regardless how the FDW perceives and treat the employer, the Christian employer has the duty to treat the FDW fairly, more so when we consider it from our Christian beliefs. Whilst the cases cited are extreme, an average Singaporean household would not starve their helper and would adhere to the law for the day-off yet how we treat our maid is a reflection of putting our belief into practice. Through work, a person gains not just a means for survival but self-worth and dignity. In God's eyes, therefore those managing workers must treat them with the dignity of one created in God's

image barring differences in cultural, socio-economical and religious background. We are called to evangelise to “all nations”: how we treat our FDW speaks volumes of our evangelisation.

REFLECTION:

Personal Reflection:

1. How do I feel about having a FDW in my house?
2. Should I consider the FDW as part of my family?
3. Is there any task that I should do myself and not delegate it to the FDW?

Christian Reflection:

1. What does the gospels, social teachings of the church and encyclicals say about treating our employees, whether at home or in the office?
2. What values do our Lord Jesus specifically teach to maintain a harmonious relationship with our FDWs?

ACT

1. How can I assist a FDW who faces challenges in working in Singapore:
 - a. As a Christian in my neighbourhood or parish?
 - b. As a CFSM member?
 2. How can CFSM, as a movement assist FDWs to settle well in Singapore during their tenure here?
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Faith Formation Session

Date: 13 November 2021

Time : 2pm to 5pm

Topic: The Vocation of the Family and Catholic Social Teachings

As for venue or Zoom meeting, it will be decided closer to the date due to the Covid pandemic. All are welcome, including friends and non-christians.