

Statement in Response to MOM's Press Release 'Weekly Rest day for Foreign Domestic Workers

We welcome and applaud The Ministry of Manpower's decision to legislate a weekly rest day for migrant domestic workers. With this new legislation in place, Singapore is a step closer towards the full recognition of domestic workers with the same rights as all other workers.

The lack of adequate protection has made live-in domestic work a highly stressful occupation and many women in such situations find it difficult to cope with the social isolation and demands of the job. As a result, many of them suffer from anxiety, depression and loneliness. Last month, it was reported that Vitria Depsi Wahyuno, an under aged Indonesian domestic worker, murdered her elderly employer because she was unable to cope with the latter's demands and constant scolding. A weekly day off is important in order for domestic workers like Vitria to receive adequate social support, and to take a mental break from work.

While we acknowledge the need for flexibility to compensate the domestic worker with pay when a rest day is not taken, we are concerned that this provision may be abused by unreasonable employers and agents who may place pressure on her to work without any days off. The bargaining power of migrant domestic workers is weak because many of them are indebted to recruitment agents from the moment they arrive in Singapore. Employers also have the unilateral right to cancel a work permit and terminate her employment without justification. As a result, workers who wish to claim their right to a weekly day off may end up losing their jobs instead. In a situation where a domestic worker is wrongfully dismissed because of this, she should be given the right to switch to a new employer.

We are also concerned that the compensation given to domestic workers in lieu of a day off is less favourable than that provided for in our national labour laws. Under the Employment Act, the employee is entitled to two days wages for work done on a rest day at the request of an employer, and which are more than half an employee's normal working hours. However, the proposed provision for domestic workers only remunerates her at a single day's rate without taking an employer's request into consideration.

HOME recognizes employers' concerns regarding the activities that their domestic workers may engage in on a rest day. In anticipation of an increase in the number of domestic workers during weekends, we have established a 'HOME Academy' which offers courses in computer and English language classes. Other skills such as baking, cooking, dress making and caregiving are also available. The government should invest in resources to provide such services to domestic workers. In addition, HOME calls upon the government to provide social support services, such as counseling, cultural and recreational activities for migrant domestic workers. Initiatives which promote positive mental health should also be implemented and funding provided to ensure these services are adequate.

Governments, trade unions and NGOs around the world have recognized the need for better protections for domestic workers. This recognition has led to the adoption of the ILO Convention 189—the Domestic Workers Convention. Singapore's decision to legislate a weekly day off should be the first among a series of reforms that will eventually lead to other employment rights that we take for granted to be extended to domestic workers.

Bridget Tan
Founder & President
Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics