

Covid-19 outbreak brings migrant workers from margin to centre of Singapore's attention

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In less than a month, the number of coronavirus cases in Singapore has increased 15 times, swelling from 1,000 to more than 15,000 cases.

With foreign workers in dormitories accounting for most of the new cases reported this month, another contagion has been taking hold among Singaporeans - that of prejudice and discrimination.

A forum letter published in Chinese daily Lianhe Zaobao earlier this month blamed the Covid-19 outbreak in dormitories on migrant workers' personal hygiene and living habits, sparking a discussion online after Ms Poh Yong Han, 22, a Singaporean student at Harvard University, translated it from Chinese to English in a Facebook post.

Last week, socialite Jamie Chua drew flak for an Instagram post about how she had a "disturbing nightmare" where she "dreamt of the Indian workers dorm and they were all rushing into my house".

Many foreign workers in dorms are from Bangladesh, India and China, with smaller numbers from South-east Asia and other parts of South Asia.

Meanwhile, a WhatsApp message circulating widely claimed that foreign workers are infecting foreign domestic workers (FDWs) with Covid-19, thus spreading it to families in Singapore.

While diseases do not discriminate by race, class, religion, gender or other identity markers, pandemics can unveil deep-seated social prejudices - and Singapore is not immune to that.

RACISM, XENOPHOBIA AND CLASSISM

Why the antagonism towards foreign workers?

When social anxiety is high amid a crisis such as Covid-19, some will naturally fall back onto pre-existing stereotypes and act upon their prejudices in order to make sense of their situation, said Mr Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, director of the Centre for Interfaith Understanding.

"Of course, how they make sense of the problem (in other words, the pandemic) is deeply misguided, racist and xenophobic... To them, the problem is always 'other people,'" he added.

Racism is clearly seen when individuals like Ms Chua single out the race of foreign workers and illogically associate them with fear.

Classism is also apparent in the case of the forum letter, where the writer highlights that many workers come from less developed countries, and says that their "lifestyle habits" - such as resting under trees or on fields, or gathering with their friends to drink beer and chat - would accompany them here.

Never mind the fact that they gather under trees or on fields because there are often no accessible or affordable places for these workers to take a breather after a hard week's work,

in the same way that Singaporeans kick back with beers with friends in kopitiams, bars or at home.

An article in The New Paper (TNP) last week also debunks the assumption that FDWs somehow pose a higher risk of transmitting the virus, just because some of them could be in relationships with foreign workers.

The Ministry of Health told TNP that none of the 17 FDWs diagnosed with Covid-19 contracted it from foreign workers. In fact, most were infected by their employers.

And even if such cases did emerge - so what? There have been cases where local Covid-19 patients were also infected by their spouses or partners, which is likely to occur if there had been close contact.

Such attitudes indicate xenophobia, where a double standard is imposed - foreigners are seen as immoral or irresponsible for having relationships and social contact, and the consequences of doing so are far more exaggerated for this group than for us Singaporeans.

LACK OF INTERACTION

To be fair, not all Singaporeans think this way. The Covid-19 situation in workers' quarters has also prompted many to step forward to help by distributing masks, food and care packs to the dorms. Others have also donated their Solidarity Payments and more to the workers, with hundreds of thousands of dollars raised in just a few days. But structural factors could be a reason for some Singaporeans' prejudiced views.

Dr Mathew Mathews, head of the Institute of Policy Studies' Social Lab, noted that migrant communities are largely segregated from the resident population in dormitories or construction sites.

"Singaporeans have, at various times, expressed their concern that they do not want to be living near the foreign worker population because they are seen as culturally very different and sometimes dangerous. This greatly reduces opportunities for interaction and the fostering of mutual trust and understanding," he said.

An International Labour Organisation study published last year also found that those who interact with migrant workers are more likely to support their presence, while those who do not are less likely to do so.

The study surveyed 4,099 nationals in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Japan, using a set of questions to determine support levels for migrants among citizens.

It also collected data on how frequently they interacted with migrants, among other things, before conducting a statistical analysis on the links between the factors.

The lack of interaction could contribute to negative views of migrant workers, and further drive a wedge between both groups.

It has not always been this way.

Before 2006, foreign construction workers were allowed to stay in Housing Board (HDB) flats, though the HDB later tightened this rule, partly in response to complaints about foreign workers in HDB estates.

However, Malaysian construction workers are exempt because the country is a traditional source for workers and "HDB residents have grown accustomed to having them living in their midst", the board had said back then.

In the interim years between 2006 and this year, the number of workers' dormitories - initially numbering slightly more than 20 - has multiplied as the demand for construction workers grew in tandem with plans for massive projects such as the integrated resorts.

In 2006, about half of the 160,000 foreign construction workers here remained in on-site housing at construction sites. As thousands more arrived, many were housed in dormitories in areas such as Tuas and Mandai, farther away from residential centres.

In 2008, about 1,400 out of 7,000 residents signed a petition to object to a proposed workers' dormitory in the Serangoon Gardens landed estate. In response, then Foreign Minister George Yeo said that the Ministry of National Development was "seriously considering how to create townships for foreign workers which are sustainable and self-contained".

Since then, more large purpose-built dormitories have come up. These dorms - run by commercial operators - may come with cinemas, cricket fields, and vendors providing services such as remittance and the sale of phone cards nearby. The rationale was to provide these on-site to encourage workers to stay in, rather than congregate elsewhere.

Today, there are 43 such purpose-built dormitories and about 1,200 more factory-converted dormitories.

More than 80 per cent of these purpose-built dormitories now have Covid-19 clusters.

These policy changes over the years are a double-edged sword.

While purpose-built dormitories are an improvement from illegal or unsafe housing locations such as rubbish bin centres, it also means that the majority of migrant workers are now isolated away from the population in far-flung housing and places of recreation exclusive to them.

Most Singaporeans turn a blind eye to this invisible class of workers, who are out of sight and out of mind. Many locals are unaware of the structural issues they face in terms of housing or welfare. The issues in the past - the lack of trust and interaction between the different groups - remain buried.

So, when a crisis like Covid-19 erupts, some are quick to point fingers at the workers without even having had the chance or opportunity to forge an understanding of issues faced by this group.

The use of terms such as "community spread" and "two separate epidemics" amid the pandemic further drives this us-versus-them mentality, noted Singapore University of Technology and Design senior lecturer Nazry Bahrawi.

This is because it suggests that foreign workers are not part of the Singapore community, he said.

FINDING A CURE FOR PREJUDICE

Manpower Minister Josephine Teo has pledged to improve the dormitory system after the pandemic.

Many other issues will need to be addressed. Who should foot the bill when standards in dorms are raised? Can companies raise productivity to be less reliant on foreign workers in construction?

On Monday, Minister for National Development Lawrence Wong, who co-chairs the multi-ministry task force on Covid-19, also said that the Government is looking into new housing arrangements for workers who have recovered from Covid-19 as part of long-term plans for housing foreign workers.

Details are not available yet, but policymakers have long spoken of how planning for workers' housing is tricky business, given the "not in my backyard" (Nimby) tendencies of Singaporeans.

With local coronavirus case figures now exploding, it is no longer possible for Singaporeans to remain apathetic to the issues confronting foreign workers.

Indeed, many who were previously ignorant or uncaring about their plight have now responded with compassion and sympathy.

An unprecedented resettlement of workers is now taking place islandwide. Thousands of workers have moved out of the dorms to other sites in a bid to reduce the dorms' density or isolate those with symptoms. The spaces they now live in are within our communities: HDB blocks in Jurong and Bukit Merah, Northshore Primary School in Punggol, as well as the former Anderson Junior College hostel in Ang Mo Kio.

This is the perfect chance for Singaporeans to show that Nimbyism will not be a limiting factor should residential areas be considered as alternative sites for workers' long-term housing.

A volunteer-led initiative, Welcome In My Backyard, has already kicked off. It aims to transform mindsets towards foreign workers and engage residents in housing estates to welcome them by partnering with grassroots volunteers, community groups and resident-ambassadors, starting with Bukit Merah.

Meanwhile, ordinary Singaporeans can start by welcoming, not shunning, the workers rehoused in our neighbourhoods.

It can bring about a longer-term change in mindsets if the right policies, programmes and infrastructure are brought into the mix to encourage interaction between Singaporeans and foreign workers in common public spaces in housing estates.

As tens of thousands of migrant workers are quarantined in their dorms to keep the rest of Singapore safe, it is time for Singaporeans as a whole to wake up to the reality of this large pool of workers in our midst, our guests to whom we owe a duty of care.

Migrant workers are part of our community. Covid-19 has brought them front and centre into our lives. It is time we stopped pushing them to the margins and started the hard work of integrating them better into our society.