

## **Govt, businesses and society need honest discussion on migrant worker issues: Panel**

***Navene Elangovan***

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SINGAPORE — Singaporeans have to depart from their “fickle” and “self-serving” mindsets if they want to see a change in migrant workers’ conditions here, the executive director of the Migrant Workers’ Centre said.

Mr Bernard Menon, who was speaking at a webinar hosted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on Wednesday (May 6), said that despite a surge in online discourse about the welfare of migrant workers after key events such as the Little India riots and the SMRT bus driver strike, Singaporeans’ attitudes towards these issues have seen little change.

The Migrant Workers' Centre, a non-governmental organisation, looks after the welfare of migrant workers.

The events Mr Menon mentioned happened in 2012, when more than 200 bus drivers from transport operator SMRT, all Chinese nationals, initiated Singapore’s first strike in over 25 years due to unhappiness over their wages. A year later, riots broke out among 300 foreign workers in Little India after an Indian worker was run over by a private bus.

“We have many people coming up and saying, ‘You should improve this, you should improve that, more of this and less of that’. And in every crisis it’s always been my hope that when we do eventually come out of this, these conversations continue and they persist,” he said.

“But unfortunately, though you can obviously tell that there’s been a gradual increase over time of interest and concern... this has lagged behind the expectations I’ve had during these crises.”

The webinar, which lasted for one-and-a-half hours, also had as its panellists Associate Professor Walter Theseira, an economist, and Assoc Prof Jeremy Lim, co-director of Global Health at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, National University of Singapore.

Joining the discussion were law professor Eugene Tan and sociologist Paulin Straughan from the Singapore Management University, as well as Mr Leonard Lim, the Singapore country director at consultancy firm Vriens & Partners.

The session on how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected Singapore’s migrant worker community was moderated by Dr Mathew Mathews, a senior research fellow at IPS.

Dr Straughan pointed out that while Singaporeans are “acutely aware” of the living conditions of migrant workers and agree that they need to be treated better, some had expressed reservations when these workers moved into their neighbourhoods.

She cited the example of how some residents had raised such concerns on Member of Parliament Christopher de Souza's Facebook page when he announced on Monday that foreign workers from dormitories will be moved into the former Nexus International School along Ulu Pandan Road.

Dr Straughan said that while the discussion can help to raise awareness on issues facing workers, the panellists should also seek to answer what the community can do to address these issues.

Agreeing, Mr Menon said that Singaporeans have a "mindset issue" that needs to be changed.

"I think Singaporeans sometimes may be a little bit fickle and self-serving in how they approach a situation and we have to depart from this kind of thinking," he said.

"Am I a housing advocate only during Covid-19 and not outside of it? If we want to build that kind of society where we are grateful to people who, transient or not, come and help us, and add on to the Singapore story, I think there must come a time where we question ourselves."

He added that a platform bringing employers, dormitory operators, government officials, non-governmental organisations and ordinary Singaporeans is needed to "honestly and openly examine (their) conscience".

## **NOT IN SINGAPOREANS' INTEREST TO PUSH FOR CHANGE**

Agreeing with Mr Menon, Assoc Prof Theseira said that one reason there is little change in mindsets is that it is not in the economic interest of Singaporeans to push for substantial change in the way migrant workers are treated.

While Singaporeans may not themselves be treating workers badly, they are benefiting from low-cost labour as a result of migrant workers, and it is not in their self-interest to "get too worked up over it", Assoc Prof Theseira said.

This is a basic problem that society has to overcome, and that Singaporeans have an "ethical duty" to treat migrant workers the same way they would want to be treated, he added.

This means coming up with common standards that apply to all workers.

For instance, on the issue of dormitory accommodation, the same kind of standards should be provided to migrant workers as it would have been if Singaporean workers were staying in these dormitories for an extended period of time, he said.

## **WHO SHOULD LEAD?**

The panelists were also split over whether the Government, the private sector or the people should take the lead in addressing issues related to migrant workers.

Mr Lim from consultancy firm Vriens & Partners said that given its “larger than life” role in Singapore, the Government had an important part to play in addressing issues related to migrant workers. This could come in the form of legislation or messaging on how to treat migrant workers better.

Mr Victor Mills, the chief executive of the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce, asked the panel what the private sector should do about the employment and housing of migrant workers after the Covid-19 crisis.

Building on Mr Mills’ question, Dr Mathews asked if the Government should impose more stringent measures on the private sector, especially since the violations by dorm operators here suggest that the private sector “did not care” about migrant workers’ welfare.

Manpower Minister Josephine Teo had said in Parliament on Monday that nearly half of the 43 purpose-built dormitories here had flouted licensing rules.

In response, Assoc Prof Lim from Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health said that he was “sceptical” about the private sector’s role because its focus is on making profits.

“As long as it’s legal, then I think it is unrealistic to expect the private sector to do more unless there is substantial public pressure as we see with ethical farming and clothing and so on,” he said.

## **TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR WORKERS’ HEALTHCARE**

Touching on the healthcare provided to workers in dormitories at the moment, Assoc Prof Lim questioned if the same type of care would have been provided should they be Singaporeans in the same situation.

Assoc Prof Lim said that when it came to the healthcare of migrant workers here, the traditional model was that employers should take responsibility for the health of their workers.

Thus, when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, the Ministry of Manpower adopted the same approach, asking dormitory operators to step up hygiene in dormitories, among other things.

However, with dormitory operators “overwhelmed” by regulations for safe distancing, Assoc Prof Lim said, the ministry had to step in, providing healthcare for workers infected with Covid-19 and housing them in community care facilities.

He said it is clear that the model of relying on employers and dorm operators does not apply during a crisis, adding that subsequent policy changes will depend on whether or not the Government sticks to the old approach or moves away from it.

## **HIGHER STANDARDS FOR WAGES, LIVING CONDITIONS**

Despite contributing significantly to Singapore's economy, migrant workers are not reaping its benefits, such as better housing conditions and wages, Assoc Prof Theseira said.

This is due to the high elasticity of the migrant worker supply. This means that there is a huge pool of people who want jobs in Singapore, reducing the bargaining power of those who are already here.

Several other obstacles stand in the way of migrant workers reaping the rewards of Singapore's economic growth.

For instance, the economic value generated by these workers is usually retained by the employer who has to look after necessities such as the lodging and healthcare of the workers. However, these benefits are not evenly distributed among workers.

Migrant workers also had to pay for high recruitment fees before coming to Singapore.

Assoc Prof Theseira said that to address these issues, policymakers will have to consider setting high minimum standards for their working and living conditions.

However, he acknowledged that some migrant labour industries may not be economically viable if this were to be imposed.