

Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore: Social and Historical Perspectives

Local and international media often represented the employment of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore as a simple dichotomy between two groups: rich and exploitative Singaporeans vs. poor and exploited domestic workers. It might have been true that the rights enjoyed by Singaporean FDWs left a lot to be desired in comparison with those accorded to other migrant workers - or even FDWs in other East Asian recipient states such as Taiwan and Hong Kong. Nevertheless, within Singapore there existed a wide spectrum of interests and opinions that helped to both determine and moderate national policy on the FDW issue.

This case study examines how attitudes towards immigration and domestic service have changed over time and across different social groups in Singapore. It will take in the various social, political, and economic factors that help to explain Singapore's positions with regard to its FDWs.

Black-and-white: the status of foreign domestic workers in Singapore's early history

Foreign domestic workers were not an uncommon sight in pre-independence Singapore. For the main part, they were made up of two groups: "black and white" *amahs* (so called for their traditional uniform of black trousers and a white shirt) and *mui tsais* (literally "little sister" in Cantonese). While both groups mostly came from China and enjoyed little legal protection, the similarities ended there.



A mother and daughter with their amah in Hong Kong (Carl Guderian/Creative commons)

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Most *amahs* belonged to all-female mutual support associations: anti-marriage sisterhoods, vegetarian halls and other forms of *kongsi* (societies) created to take the place of family ties for unmarried women. Moreover, their skills, devotion to duty and lack of a personal life placed them in high demand from both local and foreign employers.¹ An *amah* could expect to be paid as much as an English-speaking clerk.²

Mui tsais, by contrast, tended to endure worse conditions. Generally the superfluous daughters of poor Chinese families, these girls were purchased by overseas Chinese to carry out domestic labour until they were old enough to be married off. They received food, clothing, and accommodation; but no wages. The best outcome that these girls could hope for was to be freed through a marriage arranged by their employers. Unlucky *mui tsais* would find themselves sold into prostitution or subjected to years of abuse with little or no recourse.³

Immigration legislation was relatively limited in scope during the colonial era. In 1932 the British authorities banned the import of *mui tsais* and enforced registration for those already present in Singapore, but many families simply evaded the ban by bringing the girls into the country as “adopted daughters”.⁴ Further restrictions were placed upon Chinese migration to Singapore via the 1933 Aliens Ordinance. These measures originally targeted men only, partly in an attempt to control population levels, but also out of a fear that the Kuomintang was using male migrants to create an “*imperium in imperio* in Malaya”.⁵

In fact, the new regulations did little to stem the tide of immigration, but they did change the demographic make-up of the immigrant population. Previously most immigrants had been men, but after 1933 migrant jobs were increasingly taken up by women. While many of these jobs were in the traditionally female sphere of domestic labour, women also began to take on jobs in hitherto male-dominated fields such as construction. The emblematic *samsui* women who helped to build much of Singapore’s infrastructure were part of a wave of 200,000 female Chinese migrant workers who arrived in the city between 1934 and 1938.⁶

¹ Raymond, Janice G. *A passion for friends*. Spinifex Press, 2002.

² Wong, D. (1996). Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 5:1, 117-138.

³ Jaschok, Maria, and Suzanne Miers, eds. *Women and Chinese patriarchy: submission, servitude, and escape*. Zed Books, 1994.

⁴ Oishi, Nana. *Women in motion: Globalization, state policies, and labor migration in Asia*. Stanford University Press, 2005.

⁵ Low, Kelvin. "Chinese Migration and Entangled Histories: Broadening the Contours of Migratory Historiography." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 27, no. 1 (2014): 75-102.

⁶ Tang, Chee Hong. *Cantonese Women Building Labourers: A Study of a Group of Sam-Sui Women in the Building Trade*. University of Malaya, Department of Social Studies, 1960.



Samsui women (National Museum of Singapore)

As the Great Depression hit the rubber industry, British Malaya began to suffer from increasing unemployment, and in 1938 the Aliens Ordinance was amended to include quotas of female Chinese migrants. From December 1941 to September 1945 migration remained in abeyance due to the Japanese occupation.

The post-war period saw a shift in the demographic make-up of the domestic labour pool in Singapore. By this point the purchase and importation of *mui tsais* and “adopted daughters” had become rare, and fewer and fewer *amahs* were making the journey south (the last traditional *amahs* finally retired in the 1970s⁷). Nevertheless, post-war economic growth was supported by a continued rise in immigration, with more domestic workers coming from Malaysia and Indonesia. Growing unemployment also helped to make domestic service a more attractive option for local girls.

1952 saw the beginnings of Singapore’s modern immigration framework, with the introduction of the Immigration Ordinance (Ordinance Number 5), followed by the Immigration Regulations a year later. These provided for a system under which Singaporeans had priority when it came to employment, with immigrants only being accepted if they had skills that were unavailable locally. These were reinforced by the 1958 Employment Agencies Act, which restricted the people and entities permitted to import foreign labourers.

Post-Independence (1965)

With unemployment posing a serious problem following independence in 1965, these regulations were strengthened with the 1966 Immigration Act. The new restrictions were so effective that by 1970 non-residents made up only 2.9% of Singapore’s population. These changes were accompanied by a drop in unemployment from around 9% in 1965 to 4.5% in 1972. As long as local unemployment ensured a steady supply of Singaporean candidates for low-skilled jobs, demand for low-paid foreign workers remained a marginal issue. It was only from 1968 that low-skilled foreign workers (mainly from Malaysia) were brought in to fill gaps in the construction and manufacturing industries. These new immigrants were intended

⁷ Teo, Gene, “Where have all the servants gone?”, *New Nation*, 12 November 1973.

as a stop-gap measure to smooth the ups and downs of the business cycle;⁸ their numbers grew steadily in the early 70s and until the global recession of the mid-70s hit Singapore's manufacturing industries.⁹

The vast majority of the new migrant workers were employed in commercial rather than domestic fields. The result was a growing shortage of domestic labour, and a corresponding wage-increase for those women still in the sector.

As one writer to the newspaper forums put it in 1972:

The English employer pays a monthly wage of \$150, which includes evening babysitting; the Australian pays \$130, plus \$2 a time for babysitting and \$2 a week for bus fares; and the American pays a monthly wage of \$200. All three amahs work similar hours.

It is this disparity in wages which hits even harder at the Singaporean. While many know they can afford more to keep a servant, but are reluctant to spend... many more are on an income that allows only a small percentage for an amah – if they can get one at all.

With Singapore's rapid industrialization and increasing affluence, would-be amahs are thinking again. Some girl shop assistants earn \$150; a clerk/typist can get \$150; a factory hand might earn a lot less but does cleaner work under better conditions than those offered by the average family.¹⁰

The result was that domestic tasks were increasingly taken on by wives, mothers and daughters, whether in addition to or instead of other salaried labour. This posed a serious challenge for a government hoping to increase female participation in the workforce to support industrialisation efforts.

The creation of Singapore's regulatory environment for foreign domestic workers

In order to attract Singaporean women into high-growth industries such as textiles and electronics, it became necessary to provide affordable childcare.¹¹ While a part of the burden was taken up by crèches and kindergartens, the state also made a conscious decision to facilitate the import of FDWs.

In 1978, the Singapore government introduced the Foreign Maid Scheme to facilitate the hiring of domestic workers not just from Malaysia (which already enjoyed privileged immigration arrangements with Singapore), but also from other countries: the Philippines, Burma, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

⁸ Yeoh, Brenda SA, and Shirlena Huang. "Transnational Domestic Workers and the Negotiation of Mobility and Work Practices in Singapore's Home-Spaces." *Mobilities* 5, no. 2 (2010): 219-236.

⁹ Fong, Pang Eng, and Linda Lim. "Foreign labor and economic development in Singapore." *International Migration Review* (1982): 548-576.

¹⁰ Dowsett, Frances. "Buttering the amah's ricebowl the Western way", *New Nation*, 12 December 1972. It is worth noting that by this point "amah" was used to refer to any female domestic worker, not merely the black-and-white amahs of previous decades, who still commanded greater respect and higher wages than other domestic workers.

¹¹ Wong, D. (1996). Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 5(1), pp. 117-138.

When these measures were introduced, Singapore had around 5000 FDWs¹² and a female workforce participation rate of 29.3%. By 1988, these figures had increased to 40,000 FDWs and 45.2% respectively.¹³ While the entirety of the increases cannot be attributed to the Foreign Maids Scheme, it could not have been achieved without it.¹⁴

Although FDWs had never benefited from the protections provided by the 1968 Employment Act (the principal regulatory instrument covering leave, working hours, pay and conditions in Singapore)¹⁵ or the 1975 Workmen's Compensation Act (covering indemnities for workplace injuries and accidents), the 1980s saw the expansion of a raft of alternative legal structures covering FDWs.

In 1984 the Employment Agencies Act was strengthened with more restrictive conditions for employment agencies and tougher penalties for infractions. In 1986 new guidelines were issued: marriage between FDWs and Singaporeans was banned, as was pregnancy, with six-monthly tests for both pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases being imposed upon FDWs. Employers were obliged to provide a \$5,000 bond to cover the FDW's repatriation in the event that she married a Singaporean citizen, became pregnant, engaged in non-domestic labour, committed a crime, or overstayed the term of her work permit. FDWs could be employed for a maximum of two years, renewable for up to eight years (though exceptions could be made on a case-by-case basis).

The government also changed the mechanism via which levies were imposed upon foreign workers. Employers were traditionally obliged to pay 30% of foreign workers' salaries into the Central Provident Fund (CPF), a mandatory savings and social security scheme. In 1982 this was replaced by a non-Malaysian foreign worker levy, the aim of which was to limit unskilled immigration. In 1987, this charge was in turn replaced by a \$140 per-worker monthly levy. The sums paid were no longer used to provide social security coverage. Instead, the fee (paid to and kept by the government as general revenue) was intended to be flexible, and was created to enable the authorities to ensure that the cost of hiring foreign workers was in line with domestic wage levels rather than the marginal cost of foreign labour. The new levy was intended to prevent immigrant labour from depressing local wages,¹⁶ as well as to stop "overly cheap" FDWs from out-competing other childcare options such as day care centres.¹⁷

The levy policy has undergone frequent tinkering as government priorities changed. Since 1991, in response to Singapore's falling birth-rate, a tax deduction of twice the foreign worker levy was made available to mothers who employ FDWs.¹⁸ In 2004 concessionary rates were introduced for families with members aged under 12 or over 65.¹⁹ In 2012 the government

¹² Devashayam, Theresa W., "Placement and/or protection? Singapore's labour policies and practices for temporary women migrant workers", *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*, 15 (1), 2010, 45-48.

¹³ Kayoko, U., "Foreign Domestic Workers In Singapore", in *Asia's New Mothers: Crafting gender roles and childcare networks in East and Southeast Asian societies*, 2008, 140-156.

¹⁴ Hui, Weng-Tat, "Regionalization, economic restructuring and labor migration in Singapore", *International Migration*, 35 (1), 1997, 109-130.

¹⁵ Though it is worth noting that this text does include provisions for its extension to cover domestic workers at some unspecified point in the future.

¹⁶ Fong, P.E. (1992) Absorbing Temporary Foreign Workers: The Experience of Singapore. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 1:3-4, 495-509.

¹⁷ Lee, Yock Suan, then Labour Minister, quoted in *The Straits Times*, January 16, 1990.

¹⁸ Huang, Shirlene and Brenda Yeoh. "Women, childcare and the state in Singapore", *Asian Studies Review*, 17:3, 2004, 50-61.

¹⁹ Kayoko, 2008.

announced an additional \$120 per-month grant to low- and middle-income families to employ FDWs to care for elderly relatives,²⁰ a reaction to the challenge of caring for a rapidly ageing population and a national shortage of nursing facilities.

While the majority of the laws passed during the 1980s dealt purely with the economic impact of FDWs, a series of high-profile “maid abuse” cases in the 1990s led to the development of regulations aimed at providing greater protection to FDWs.

Although the levy system continued to exclude FDWs from the CPF social security system, in 1997 the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act was modified to require employers to take out a \$10,000 accident insurance for their domestic workers. This followed a wave of incidents in which FDWs died as a result of falling, whether in escape attempts, suicides, or while cleaning apartment windows.

1998 saw the introduction of harsher penalties for employers convicted of abusing FDWs, with abusive employers liable to be sentenced to half again as much prison time as individuals convicted of the same offense outside of a domestic labour relationship.

Since 2004 all employment agencies had to be accredited by either the Association of Employment Agencies in Singapore (AEAS), comprised of employment agents; or CASETrust, a certification programme by the consumer rights group CASE. In order to be accredited, agencies had to possess a minimum level of cash reserves, keep records of their placements, and have procedures in place for resolving disputes between domestic workers and employers. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) also initiated orientation programmes for new employers and employees, with a particular focus on the dangers of working at height.

In 2005 the rules surrounding the work permit system were revised. Employers were placed under an obligation to pay their workers monthly and “ensure that the worker is not ill-treated, exploited, wilfully neglected or endangered”. Any employer found to be in breach of these rules were liable to be sentenced to up to six months' imprisonment, a maximum fine of S\$5,000, revocation of the work permit, and a prohibition from employing foreign domestic workers in the future. The minimum age for FDWs was raised from 18 to 23, and all candidates were required to pass an English test. Also, they had to prove that they had undergone at least eight years of formal education.

In 2006 the government introduced a new standard contract template for FDWs, which required that they be provided with three “adequate” meals per day, and which “recommends, but does not require” at least eight hours of continuous rest.

In 2012 the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act of 1990 was modified to extend employers' responsibilities with regard to their FDWs. It specified that employers had to provide adequate food and medical treatment, as well as “acceptable” accommodation. Employers were also required to pay for the FDWs' repatriation to an “international port of entry that affords reasonable access to the foreign employee's hometown” as well as ensure that all outstanding wages are paid prior to repatriation. The modified text increased the amount of health insurance that had to be purchased for the FDW to \$15,000. The 2012 text also codified previous advice regarding the cleaning of upper-floor windows and reiterated prohibitions against maid abuse. It stipulated that FDWs had to be given one unpaid rest day

²⁰ Huang, Shirlena, and Brenda Yeoh. “Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore: A Neglected Social Issue?” in *50 Years of Social Issues in Singapore*, World Scientific, 2015.

per week, though this could be replaced with a day's work paid at no less than the ordinary daily rate if the employer and the FDW agreed in advance.

The MOM guidelines to employers included additional details, specifying – for example – that “adequate” shelter meant a room with a mattress, pillow, blanket and good ventilation, away from safety hazards, and not shared with male adults or teenagers. Adequate food is defined as three daily meals of bread, rice, vegetables, meat, and fruit. Employers were also advised to be “patient and tolerant” and help their FDWs communicate with their families to ease homesickness.

FDW regulation: implementation and critiques

Singapore's regulations regarding domestic labour were remarkable for what was absent. That FDWs were deprived of the protections accorded by the Employment Act and the Work Injury Compensation Act meant that, for example, no legally enforceable limits were placed upon working hours, and that no rules existed regarding overtime pay. In contrast with Hong Kong,²¹ Singapore had no minimum wage and no laws regarding pay discrimination against workers of different nationalities. Any minimum wage requirements that existed were instead imposed by the FDWs' home countries – \$550 per month for Filipinas, for example.²²

The Singapore government has often put forward the case that the invisibility of domestic labour makes it inherently difficult to regulate. As one official said: “[H]ow to calculate [overtime] when workers never leave the employment place?”²³

Even where the government has shown a willingness to regulate FDWs' terms of employment, the fact that the domestic work happened within private spaces meant that violations were often difficult to identify and prosecute. The problem of detecting and regulating abuses taking place inside private residences has proven so daunting that the Indonesian government has declared that it intended to stop sending *live-in* FDWs abroad from 2017.²⁴ Given that Singaporean law obliged FDWs to live with their employers, this would effectively ban the employment of Indonesian FDWs in Singapore if enforced.

Moreover, the “invisibility” of domestic work was not the only potential source of abuse. The power imbalance between FDWs, employment agencies, and employers was also a serious problem. Threats of fines or repatriation have often been used to dissuade FDWs from attempting to leave abusive employers, as well as to persuade them to accept iniquitous contracts, extortionate “loans”, and inadequate living conditions.²⁵

Moreover, there was a lack of regulatory provisions surrounding the fees charged by employment agencies to FDWs. While the Employment Agencies Act forbid agencies from charging job-seekers more than 10% of their first month's wages in fees, these provisions did

²¹ Carvalho, Raquel, “Study shows which Hong Kong employers pay domestic helpers the least”, *South China Morning Post*, 10 September 2016, retrieved 6 October 2016: <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2018255/study-shows-which-hong-kong-employers-pay-domestic-helpers>.

²² Seow, Joanna, “Bosses must now pay Filipino maids at least \$550 a month”, *Straits Times*, 21 January 2016, retrieved 6 October 2016. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/manpower/bosses-must-now-pay-filipino-maids-at-least-550-a-month>.

²³ Human Rights Watch, *Maid to Order: Ending Abuses against Migrant Domestic Workers*, December 2005.

²⁴ Arshad, Arlina and Joanna Seow, “Indonesia plans to stop sending new live-in maids abroad”, *Straits Times*, 18 May 2016, recovered 28 September 2016 <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-plans-to-stop-sending-new-live-in-maids-abroad>.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch, 2005.

not apply to work permit holders – arguably the most vulnerable group of migrant workers. In practice, the fees charged by employment agencies are commonly reclaimed via salary deductions, which were so high that for her first four to ten months in Singapore a FDW might earn nothing at all after deductions.²⁶ These charges could be compounded by additional accommodation and administrative fees imposed by the agencies in the event that a worker requests a change of employers – another factor that dissuaded FDWs from leaving abusive postings.²⁷ The Singapore government has argued that the money collected by agencies recruiting FDWs is not a fee but rather a private loan to cover airfares and placement costs.²⁸

Some abuses have also been committed by foreign recruitment agencies. Many FDWs have told stories of being defrauded, threatened, abused, and imprisoned by recruitment agencies based in their home countries.²⁹ Similarly, investigations have shown that recruitment agencies often colluded to break such laws as exist to protect FDWs, both by sending underage girls to Singapore on false passports and by helping employers cover up abuses in the event that a complaint is made.³⁰

The \$5,000 bond paid by employers has also been criticised. The risk of a \$5,000 fine if a FDW broke the rules of her work permit has been said to transfer the burden of policing the FDW's actions from the state onto her employers, potentially encouraging abusive and exploitative behaviour on the part of employers in an effort to “keep tabs” on the FDW's activities³¹. According to a survey carried out by Singaporean NGO HOME (Humanitarian Organisation for Migrant Economics), 67% of employers retained their FDW's passport and 60% kept their FDW's employment contract, in direct contravention of the law. Similarly, 27% of FDWs reported invasions of privacy by their employers (commonly involving searching through the FDW's belongings or checking her mobile phone), while 73% had their communications limited and 74% had their movements restricted³². The risk that FDWs may engage in paid labour outside their employer's home or become pregnant was frequently cited by employers as a reason for refusing to accord them any days off. According to Home's survey, only 40% of FDWs received a weekly rest day (although this was up from just 12% in 2011, partially in response to 2012 changes in the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act, but also as a result of modifications to the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration standard employment contract). According to research carried out by Human Rights Watch in 2011, the top reason given by employers for not allowing their FDWs a day off was to “avoid the maid falling into bad company” (with the implication that this could result behaviour that would forfeit their bond money). If the \$5,000 bond did not exist, 39.6% of employers said that they would consider giving their FDWs a day off, 18.8% would “strongly consider” it, and 4.2% would definitely allow their FDW a day off.³³

²⁶ Home, *Home Sweet Home? Work, life and well-being of foreign domestic workers in Singapore*, March 2015

²⁷ Human Rights Watch, 2005.

²⁸ Kaur, A. (2007). “International Labour Migration in Southeast Asia: Governance of Migration and Women Domestic Workers” in *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, 15.

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, 2005.

³⁰ Lee, Lynn and James Leong, *Maid in Singapore*, Al Jazeera, 29 September 2016, retrieved 6 October 2016

³¹ Huang, Shirlena, and Brenda Yeoh, “The Difference Gender Makes: State Policy and Contract Migrant Workers in Singapore”, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 12, No. 1-2, 2003.

³² Home, 2015.

³³ UNIFEM Singapore, HOME, TWC2. (2011). *Made to Work: Attitudes Towards Granting Regular Days Off to Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore*. Accessed June 26, 2016. <http://www.unwomen-nc.org.sg/uploads/Day%20Off%202011%20June%2022.pdf>.

While the laws surrounding maid abuse and the regular payment of wages have been strengthened, some problems remained. The number of police warnings issued to employers following complaints of abuse fell from 157 in 1997 to 59 in 2004. However, many FDWs still reported having been threatened with deportation or further abuse if they contacted the police, or having been afraid to make a complaint for fear that they would be disbelieved and returned to their employer or employment agency or repatriated. Investigations by Human Rights Watch turned up widely varying reports of police responses to complaints of maid abuse – from full-scale rescue operations to indifference.³⁴ In response to this problem, several feeder countries have established help desks in their embassies for FDWs wishing to leave their employers but afraid to contact the Singaporean police. In 2011 the Indonesian Embassy reported receiving fifty complaints per day, while the Philippines Embassy and the Sri Lankan High Commission reported between forty and eighty complains per month.³⁵

Related to this problem were issues surrounding the non-payment of wages. Many FDWs complained of receiving a lower salary than promised, being subjected to *ad hoc* “charges” or “fines” by their employer or employment agency, or even of receiving no wages at all. While the law provided FDWs with recourse in these cases, it might have been difficult for them to exercise the full range of options available to them. Either they were unaware of their rights, subjected to threats by their employer or employment agency, or lacked the resources to initiate complex and drawn-out legal proceedings. Moreover, the MOM frequently referred the complaints that it received to mediation. This process would involve the FDW, the employer, the employment agency, an MOM official, and sometimes a representative from the FDW's embassy. Approximately 80% of these proceedings resulted in the FDW accepting a settlement and receiving substantially less than she was owed, purely in order to resolve the case and be able to move to a new employer³⁶.

Perceptions of Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore

In recent years the Singaporean press has seen a variety of common narratives develop on the theme of migrant workers. These concerned not only FDWs, but also their male counterparts (construction workers from India, China, and Southeast Asia working in Singapore on work permits) and – at the other end of the scale – the highly paid “foreign talent” recruited abroad to take up high-level positions in Singaporean companies and public services. (The third group of immigrant workers – mid-skilled S-pass holders such as nurses – were generally far less visible in public discourse.)

Recurring themes regarding FDWs could be found in both the “Forum” section of The Straits Times, in op-eds, and online:

- Employers of FDWs complaining that the levies and guarantees demanded by the government from them are excessively high.³⁷
- Citizens complaining that foreign worker Sunday enclaves (Lucky Plaza, Little India) are unsightly and unsafe, or criticising the snobbery of those complaining about the foreign worker Sunday enclaves.³⁸

³⁴ Human Rights Watch, 2011.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch, 2011.

³⁷ See, for example: Lee Yewkee, Ronald, “Waive Levy”, *Straits Times*, 31 October 2002; Ng, Kim-Gau, “Extend Relief for Maid Levy to Singles”, *Straits Times*, 12 April 2006; Ho Kwok Hoong, Jimmy, “Lift the Maid Levy”, *Today* (afternoon edition), 17 May 2007.

³⁸ See, for example: Kang, Choon Kiat, “Why not screen movies for foreign workers?”, *Straits Times*, 16 April

- Sporadic, high-profile “maid abuse” cases leading to public outrage.³⁹
- Protests made by the governments of FDWs' countries of origin regarding working conditions or criminal trials involving FDWs.⁴⁰
- Campaigns by NGOs and civil society to publicise abuses and extend FDWs' rights.⁴¹

However, these discourses should be situated not merely within a wider landscape of attitudes and opinions surrounding FDWs, but also within the Singaporean immigration debate more generally.

Understanding the employer-FDW relationship

While the employer-FDW relationship was sometimes seen by outsiders as purely exploitative, research carried out by Shirlena Huang, Brenda Yeoh, and others underlined the variety of different experiences and interpretations possible on the part of both parties. While surveys showed that some households engaged in abusive practices and intrusive policing of their FDWs' behaviour, in others the experience of sudden and extreme proximity to a relative stranger or strangers within the domestic sphere was a nerve-wracking experience for both parties. It was partly for this reason that Filipina FDWs command a premium despite their more stringent employment contracts – employers preferred women who spoke English and who were likely to have a broadly similar cultural background and habits (something that is also frequently referenced by employment agencies in the efforts they made to assure prospective clients that their FDWs “speak good English” and “have good hygiene practices”).⁴²

Employers dealt with the uncertainty of the situation in different ways. As one employer quoted by Huang and Yeoh described her experience:

My current maid is okay, she doesn't really want to mix with the family. She is not very talkative. But the previous maid we had always tried to be part of the family, she used to sit down for dinner with us. That was my mistake lah. I said, 'You can eat with the kids or you can eat when we are eating', so it ended up when my husband and I wanted to talk, she's always asking

1998; Kwek Eng Tai, Ivan, “Discrimination against maids at Lucky Plaza”, 1 April 1998; Kan, Joseph, “Are youth the only culprits of littering?”, *Today* (afternoon edition), 31 October 2006; Ho, Koon Yann, “Litter, noise from foreign workers”, *Straits Times*, 19 April 2009...

³⁹ See Annex 3 for more details, also, for example: Lim, Boon Hee, “Why a sick cat can turn into a tigress”, *Today* (afternoon edition), 29 July 2009; Ang, Daniel, “People with maids are employers, not gods”, *Straits Times*, 12 December 2001; Loh Khum Fei, Mark, “It's our duty to be kind and humane”, *Straits Times*, 20 July 2002...

⁴⁰ See, for example: Dancel, Raul, “Spokesman for Rodrigo Duterte says remarks on burning Singapore flag made 'jokingly'”, *Straits Times*, 2 May 2016. Retrieved 23 October 2016: <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/spokesman-for-rodrigo-duterte-says-remarks-on-burning-singapore-flag-made-jokingly>; Arshad, Arlina and Joanna Seow, “Indonesia plans to stop sending new live-in maids abroad”, *Straits Times*, 18 May 2016, retrieved 28 September 2016 <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-plans-to-stop-sending-new-live-in-maids-abroad>; Seow Joanna, “Bosses must now pay Filipino maids at least \$550 a month”, *Straits Times*, 21 January 2016, retrieved 23 October 2016: <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/manpower/bosses-must-now-pay-filipino-maids-at-least-550-a-month...>

⁴¹ See, for example, Gee, John, “Isolated cases? There's more than one a week”, *Straits Times* (afternoon edition), 9 July 2007; Yap, Sean, “New campaign for maids to get weekly day off generates debate online”, *AsiaOne*, 24 April 2015, retrieved 23 October 2016: <http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/new-campaign-maids-get-weekly-day-generates-debate-online>; see also the Day Off campaign website [http://dayoff.org.sg/...](http://dayoff.org.sg/)

⁴² Huang, Shirlena, and Brenda SA Yeoh. “Maids and ma'ams in Singapore: Constructing gender and nationality in the transnationalization of paid domestic work.” In *Geography Research Forum*, vol. 18, pp. 22-48. 2016.

us questions. She got a bit too familiar with us, so after that experience, I said, okay, from now on I will just treat my maids like business: they do their work and that's it. I'm not going to get them so involved so as not to be too familiar with them. When you get too familiar with them, you cannot give them instructions and they will not take instructions from you...⁴³

Another employer had the opposite experience, and said about her Indonesian FDWs: “when they first arrived I watched them closely, but now that I'm comfortable with them, I leave them to run the household.”⁴⁴ Other employers set up tests for their FDWs – leaving small amounts of money in visible places for example, or returning from work at unexpected times.⁴⁵

Even within families, different members had different approaches to negotiating their relationship with their FDWs:

My mother-in-law is never happy with the maid unless she is on her feet 24 hours a day. Unless she sees her doing something every minute of the day, she is not happy. If the maid even takes as much as five minutes off her usual time to go to bed, she will say, “What's she doing inside? What's she doing inside?” If she goes to the toilet... you know, some people take at least half an hour okay, my father-in-law sometimes stays in for half an hour too. And then she'll complain to me, “A maid cannot stay in the toilet for half an hour. Tsk!” And I say, “Please lah, biological things, you can't control, you know, you've got to give her her privacy for half an hour, leave her alone!”⁴⁶

Some employers broke the law by allowing their FDWs to live outside the home and to come in to work every day, such as “Mr. Esmail” quoted by the *Straits Times* saying that “I value my privacy, so I like the idea of hiring a helper who isn't staying with me.”⁴⁷ This, however, was exceptional, and the majority of employers felt obliged to keep a close eye upon their FDWs, for fear of losing their \$5,000 bond. As one employer told Huang and Yeoh:

Whenever she's free, she's with a Bible... I was telling my husband, wow, we've got a really holy holy maid, and wow, so proud of her [until] she got involved with a local Indian man and got pregnant... I felt... really very, very, very let down.

Lives of their own: FDWs express themselves

Many FDWs have expressed fatalistic attitudes towards mistreatment⁴⁸, particularly (for cultural and religious reasons) Indonesians. As one Indonesian FDW put it:

I am a servant... it is a job, I cannot 'I don't want this or want that', no, if that's what there is, we'll do it. My purpose here is to work. If I do wrong and get scolded, I'll accept, if I'm not in the wrong, still okay.⁴⁹

⁴³ Yeoh and Huang, 2010.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Wei, Aw Cheng and Joanna Seow, “Live-out maids 'will lead to more costs, issues'”, *Straits Times*, 19 May 2016.

⁴⁸ Huang and Yeoh, 2016.

⁴⁹ Yeoh and Huang, 2010.



Filipino workers gather at Lucky Plaza on a Sunday (Straits Times)

Nevertheless, the stereotype of the downtrodden domestic drudge was not universal. Many Filipina FDWs interviewed by Huang and Yeoh saw their experience of foreign culture as placing them a cut above their compatriots who have never travelled (though nevertheless beneath FDWs who have succeeded in finding employment in Europe or America)⁵⁰. The mandatory days off written into the standard Filipino FDW contract gave them opportunities to express their independence and personality, freed from the constant proximity of their employers. This was done in various different ways: some FDWs used the day off to practice their religion, study towards qualifications or become volunteer leaders within the migrant community.⁵¹ Many FDWs used their day off to symbolically assert their individuality by dressing flamboyantly according to the tastes of their home nation, rather than in the baggy shorts and t-shirt that were the standard “uniform” for FDWs at work.⁵²

Large numbers of FDWs also congregated in “Sunday enclaves” – areas that have been adopted by both male and female work permit holders as places to meet and socialise on their days off. Over time certain spaces have effectively been “colonised” by low-income foreign workers: Lucky Plaza mall for Filipinos, the Peninsula Plaza for Myanmar workers, etc. Workers who are largely invisible from Monday to Saturday effectively erupted into the public space on Sundays. Again, local responses varied widely. Some employers were sympathetic to the trend. One employer cited by Huang and Yeoh put it: “I think it’s very natural for them to want to speak, at least for that one day, their own dialect again and mix with their countrymen.”⁵³ Others worried about the potential for sexual or criminal misbehaviour (and therefore the subsequent forfeiting of their \$5,000 bond). As one said:

What happens is that one place you have all these girls, and then there are also many labourers, these are all guys. It is quite natural because both sides are alone and want to be friendly... The density of the population leaves much to be desired... you’re rubbing against each other... sometimes

⁵⁰ Yeoh, Brenda SA, and Maria Andrea Soco. "The cosmopolis and the migrant domestic worker." *Cultural Geographies* 21, no. 2 (2014): 171-187.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Yeoh, Brenda SA, and Shirlena Huang. "Negotiating public space: Strategies and styles of migrant female domestic workers in Singapore." *Urban studies* 35, no. 3 (1998): 583-602.

⁵³ Ibid.

*they break out in fights, especially the girls over boys and things like that.*⁵⁴

Moreover, this sentiment was not limited to employers of FDWs – the *Straits Times* Forum pages were a rich source of letters complaining that the Sunday enclaves have become “crowded”, “noisy”, and “dirty” as a result of the foreign workers’ presence.⁵⁵

However, despite frequent reminders of their subordinate status from their Singaporean hosts, for many of the Filipina FDWs interviewed by Yeoh and Soco, it was discrimination on the part of “high-rank” fellow-migrants that offended them most.⁵⁶ Conversely, S-pass and employment pass holders worried about being taken for maids by Singaporeans.⁵⁷

Public perceptions of employers and FDWs

Sunday enclaves aside, non-employers often seemed more sympathetic to FDWs’ conditions than employers. Over 70% of non-employers surveyed said that FDWs should get at least one day off per week, compared to the 12% who did actually receive rest days at the time that the survey was conducted⁵⁸ (though this might have been largely reflective of a greater awareness of the \$5,000 bond on the part of employers).

In recent years occasional media stories of “maid abuse”, as well as ill-treatment meted out to other work permit holders, have become focusing events for an increasingly vocal strand of online opinion condemning “heartless” and “uncivilised” behaviour by employers.⁵⁹

According to a survey carried out by the International Labour Organisation in 2012, over 80% of Singaporean respondents believed that migrant workers should be given equal treatment with citizens,⁶⁰ though this has not yet translated into a concerted push for legislative reform. (It is also worth noting that in the same survey nearly 70% of respondents felt that the Singapore government was currently doing enough to protect migrant workers, indicating a certain amount of confusion regarding the protections currently available to FDWs⁶¹).

As Victoria Wee put it, speaking about the killing of Indonesian FDW Muwanatul Chasanah:

*It seems to be that it is only the extreme cases that are taken seriously, but these crimes are just the tip of the iceberg. There is a lot of abuse, harassment and exploitation going on, but it's just not visible. If this Indonesian woman had not died she would still be suffering abuse from her employer and probably nothing would have happened.*⁶²

Moreover, the mass sympathy expressed in the press and on social media was frequently contradicted by the existence of explicitly discriminatory rules in semi-public places: bans on

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Yeoh and Soco, 2014.

⁵⁷ Choi, Seori, and Lenore Lyons. "Gender, citizenship, and women's 'unskilled' labour: The experience of Filipino migrant nurses in Singapore." *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 24, no. 1 (2012): 1-26.

⁵⁸ UNIFEM Singapore/HOME/TWC2, 2011.

⁵⁹ To get a flavour of public opinion on the issue it is worth consulting the comments and social media of popular “alternative” Singapore news outlets and forums: TR Emeritus, The Online Citizen, Sammyboy.com etc.

⁶⁰ Tunon, Max, and Nilim Baruah. "Public attitudes towards migrant workers in Asia." *Migration and Development* 1, no. 1 (2012): 149-162.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Baker, Mark. “Hell's kitchen for Singapore maids”, *The Age*, 24 July 2002, retrieved 4 October 2016. <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/23/1027332376412.html>.

FDWs entering country clubs, using condo swimming pools, or taking the same elevators as their employers, for example.⁶³ Individuals might seldom admit to lobbying for the introduction of such rules in the spaces that they occupy, their continued existence implied the presence of a substantial demand, or at the very least indifference.

The government, for its part, still tended to both see and parse the FDW issue in strictly economic terms – as a matter of managing unemployment, growth and inflation; rather than as a social or a human rights issue. When the authorities did consider other aspects of Singapore's dependence upon FDWs, the issue tended to be framed in terms of concerns that the reliance upon domestic workers risked making the younger generation spoilt and lazy⁶⁴ or attempts to reassure citizens that immigration would not dilute Singapore's culture⁶⁵.

Comparison with attitudes towards other migrant workers

While FDWs received different treatment from “foreign talent” (employment pass holders), they are also subject to different conditions from their male counterparts – foreign construction workers also in Singapore on work permits. Once again, the difference could largely be attributed to the invisibility of domestic labour.

In 2016 Singapore was host to 326,700 foreign construction workers (as compared to 237,100 FDWs), up from 293,300 in 2012.⁶⁶ Construction workers suffered from many of the same problems as FDWs, notably a high rate of work-related injuries,⁶⁷ discrimination, exclusion, and pay disputes with employers. However, they also benefitted from several key advantages. Firstly they were – unlike FDWs – covered by the Employment Act and the Work Injury Compensation Act, and were allowed to join trade unions. Secondly, they did not live at their place of work, so overtime and rest times were easier to regulate. Moreover, the greater visibility and mobility of construction workers gave them a better chance of finding a platform to air any grievances that they have: in 2002, for example, a group of construction workers protested outside Parliament and filed a lawsuit regarding unpaid wages.⁶⁸ The Singapore government also provided financial incentives for employers to have their construction workers participate in “skills upgrading” in the form of cheaper levies charged to employers of “skilled” construction workers. No such advantages were offered in the case of FDWs, with all domestic work being considered unskilled.⁶⁹ Similarly, while male construction workers were subjected to the same \$5,000 employer bond as FDWs, the absence of any risk of pregnancy meant that they were subject to less intensive employer scrutiny.⁷⁰

⁶³ Yap, Mui Teng and David Chan. *50 Years of Social Issues in Singapore*. World Scientific, 2015.

⁶⁴ BBC News, “Singapore pupils go back to basics”, 24 June 2002, retrieved 4 October 2016. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2062190.stm>.

⁶⁵ Lim, Clarence, *Immigration in Singapore: changing reactions and rhetoric*, Institute for Policy Studies, 8 Jan 2015.

⁶⁶ Ministry of Manpower, *Foreign Workforce Numbers*, Accessed September 27 2016.

<http://www.mom.gov.sg/documents-and-publications/foreign-workforce-numbers>.

⁶⁷ In the first eight months of 2016, there were 54 deaths as a result of falling from heights, of which 20 were in the construction sector. Ho, Olivia. “54 workplace deaths so far this year; falls most common cause”, *Straits Times*, 27 September 2016.

⁶⁸ Huang, Shirlena, and Brenda Yeoh, “The Difference Gender Makes: State Policy and Contract Migrant Workers in Singapore”, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 12, No. 1-2, 2003.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Public attitudes towards FDWs and construction workers could be contrasted with those towards migrant workers at the opposite end of the scale: S-pass holders and employment pass holders (the latter often referred to as “foreign talent”).

While FDWs and foreign construction workers were not widely seen as a threat to local jobs or wages,⁷¹ S-pass holders and foreign talent often were. Moreover, unlike work-permit holders, S-pass holders and foreign talent had the potential to become long-term residents and the wherewithal to express themselves publicly. Though they were fewer in number than work permit holders (in 2016 Singapore played host to 189,600 employment pass holders and 179,400 S-pass holders), their presence tended to be more sharply felt. In a survey carried out by the Institute for Policy Studies, 44.8% of respondents felt that the presence of foreign talent was bad for job security, while 38.9% saw it as a threat to “national cohesiveness”. 52% said that they thought the numbers of foreign talent present in Singapore should be reduced.⁷² Employment pass holders, who often had long-term or permanent residency but were not obliged to fulfil the 2-year national service requirement imposed upon young Singaporean males, were commonly be seen as mercenary outsiders taking advantage of employment and scholarship opportunities unavailable to locals.⁷³ Moreover, cultural clashes are frequent, with regular social media scandals in response to “uncivilised” behaviour by foreign talent.⁷⁴ As one online commenter remarked about an incident involving a complaint by a family of Chinese immigrants about the smell of their (ethnic Indian) Singaporean neighbours' cooking, “In highlighting this case, it makes this particular PRC family look bad, probably deservedly so. The bigger problem is that it shows that our foreign guests are not integrating. Worse still, they know how to make their complaints heard and addressed. It spoils the market for other, more sensitive foreign guests.”⁷⁵

Attitudes towards immigration in general

Singaporean public opinion towards immigration might often seem contradictory. While around 80% of the respondents to the ILO survey agreed that migrants were necessary and made a net contribution to Singapore's economy, over 80% also believed that the government should roll out a more restrictive immigration policy, and over 50% saw migrants as a source of crime.⁷⁶ However, in Singapore as in elsewhere, personal contact with migrant workers was correlated with better perceptions of them: 51% of employers of migrants had a positive image of them, as opposed to just 30% of those who had no contact with foreign workers.⁷⁷ Other social factors also had an effect: people in lower socio-economic brackets tended to have worse perceptions of migrant workers than those with higher qualifications and incomes⁷⁸ – which implied that while “foreign talent” tended to attract most of the public opprobrium, it was the mid-ranking S-pass holders who were seen as the real threat to local livelihoods.

⁷¹ Tunon and Baruah, 2012.

⁷² Leong, Chan-Hoong, and Debbie Soon. *A Study on Emigration Attitudes of Young Singaporeans*. Institute of Policy Studies, 2011.

⁷³ Koh, Aaron. "Global flows of foreign talent: Identity anxieties in Singapore's ethnoscape." *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* (2003): 230-256.

⁷⁴ Yeoh, Brenda SA, and Weiqiang Lin. "Chinese migration to Singapore: Discourses and discontents in a globalizing nation-state." *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 22, no. 1 (2013): 31-54.

⁷⁵ Gomes, Catherine. "Xenophobia online: unmasking Singaporean attitudes towards 'foreign talent' migrants." *Asian Ethnicity* 15, no. 1 (2014): 21-40.

⁷⁶ Tunon and Baruah, 2012.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Leong and Soon, 2011.

While it may have been easy to construct a narrative of a first-world population exploiting, fearing and resenting migrant workers, Singaporean attitudes towards immigration were, in fact, far more complex than this. Yang Peidong even went so far as to argue that immigration, rather than being a threat to national cohesion, in fact worked to promote it. As a recently created, multi-ethnic, “artificial” state, Singaporean identity was frequently parsed in terms of what it was *not*, rather than what it was.⁷⁹ As one Chinese Singaporean put it “I feel closer to my Malay and Indian Singaporean brothers whom I grew up with, whom I did national service (NS) with, than some mainland Chinese.”⁸⁰ In other words, the “different” behaviour that marked immigrants as outsiders also permitted locals to define themselves as insiders. As Siah Chiang Nee put it in an article about Chinese Singaporeans citizens condemning an attack by a Chinese immigrant against a Malay Singaporean:

*In the 60s and 70s ethnic conflicts were a daily story in Singapore generally over who should get a bigger piece of the economic pie. Every issue seemed to revolve around race. The impact of globalisation and the mass inflow of foreigners are helping the Chinese and the Malays achieve commonality faster than anything else. It has promoted a common bond – as well as a sense of nationalism – which would have been a lot slower without the 2,000,000 foreigners.*⁸¹

Questions for the reader

1. In designing immigration policy, which stakeholders' views and interests should be given greatest priority? Can any stakeholders be ignored? Why?
2. Is it possible to reconcile all the various stakeholders' demands in this case? What kind of trade-offs do you think would be acceptable to the parties?
3. Why do you think that Singaporean public sentiment in favour of the rights of FDWs has not led to a stronger regulatory framework?
4. Other nations – notably Japan and South Korea – have looked towards Singapore's FDW policy for inspiration when it comes to increasing female workforce participation and finding a solution to their demographic problems. Would you recommend that they copy the Singaporean model? Do you think that this would affect the FDW job market?
5. Can you think of any immigration policy that would enjoy wide public support among Singapore citizens?

⁷⁹ Yang, Peidong. “‘Authenticity’ and ‘foreign talent’ in Singapore: the relative and negative logic of national identity.” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 29, No. 2, 2014: 408-437.

⁸⁰ Liu, Hong. “Beyond co-ethnicity: the politics of differentiating and integrating new immigrants in Singapore.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37, No. 7, 2004: 1225-1238.

⁸¹ Siah, Chiang Nee, “It's Singaporean vs. others”, *The Star*, 25 June 2011. Retrieved 5 October 2016: <http://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/insight-down-south/2011/06/25/its-singaporean-vs-others/>.

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Annex 1 – Number of FDWs in Singapore

Year	Number of FDWs in Singapore
1978	5000 ⁸²
1978	20000 ⁸³
1988	40000 ⁸⁴
1989	50000 ⁸⁵
1997	100000 ⁸⁶
2002	140000 ⁸⁷
2005	150000 ⁸⁸
2008	170000 ⁸⁹
2010	201000 ⁹⁰
2011	196000 ⁹¹
2012	209600 ⁹²
2013	214500 ⁹³
2014	222500 ⁹⁴
2015	231500 ⁹⁵
2016	237100 ⁹⁶

82 Devashayam, 2010

83 Kayoko, 2008

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Yeoh, Brenda SA, and Shirlena Huang. "Negotiating public space: Strategies and styles of migrant female domestic workers in Singapore." *Urban studies* 35, no. 3 (1998): 583-602.

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90 Transient Workers Count Too, 2011

91 UNIFEM Singapore, HOME, TWC2, 2011

92 Ministry of Manpower, 2016

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

Annex 2 – Table of relevant legislation

Year	Title of Measure	Content
1932	<i>Mui Tsai</i> Ordinance	Bans the import of new <i>mui tsais</i> , imposes registration of existing ones
1933	Aliens Ordinance	Restricts male Chinese immigration
1938	Aliens Ordinance (amendment)	Quotas introduced for female Chinese immigrants
1952	Immigration Ordinance/Ordinance Number 5	Only Singapore citizens may enter the country freely
1953	Immigration regulations	Limits low-paid/low-skilled immigration
1958	Employment Agencies Act	Regulates the people and entities allowed to import foreign labourers
1959	Immigration Ordinance	Lists categories of people prohibited from entering the country and reinforces border controls
1966	Immigration Act	Establishes new, stronger regulation of immigration following independence
1968	Employment Act	Regulates pay and conditions for all workers except managers, seamen and FDWs
1975	Workmen's Compensation Act (later modified to become the Work Injury Compensation Act)	Regulates indemnities for accidents at work; does not apply to FDWs
1978	Foreign Maid Scheme	Facilitates hiring FDWs
1982	Levy Scheme	Non-Malaysian foreign worker levy replaces CFP contributions
1984	Employment Agencies Act (amendment)	Applies more restrictive regulation and stronger penalties to employment agencies
1986	FDW Guidelines	\$5,000 bond for employers, regulations regarding marriage and pregnancy
1987	Employment of Foreign Workers (Levy) Order	New levy intended to be more flexible and adapt to changing economic circumstances
1991	Employment of Foreign Workers (Levy) Order (amendment)	Tax deduction of twice the foreign worker levy made available to mothers who

		employ FDWs
1997	Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (amendment)	Employers must take out \$10,000 accident insurance on behalf of their FDWs
1998	Penal Code (amendment)	Tougher penalties for employers convicted of maid abuse
2004	Employment Agencies Act (amendment)	Employment agencies must henceforth be accredited by either CaseTrust or AEAS
2004	Concessionary Levy Scheme	Lower levies charges for families with members aged under 12 or over 65
2005	Work Permit Conditions	Minimum qualifications and age for FDWs raised, tougher sanctions against employers found to be breaking the rules
2006	Standard FDW Contract	Includes three adequate meals per day and recommends eight hours of continuous rest
2012	Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (amendment)	Codifies protections for FDWs – working at height, pay and conditions
2012	Elderly Care Grant	Grants for families employing a FDW to take care of an elderly relative
2016	Advance Placement Scheme	Pilot scheme to bring FDWs to Singapore without previously matching them with an employer (aimed to assist families who need help with urgent care needs).

Annex 3 – Immigration in the Singaporean media: examples of high-visibility focusing incidents involving foreign workers

Year	Incident	Description
1995	Execution of Flor Contemplacion	Execution of Filipina maid for murder leads to strained relations between Singapore and Philippines
2000	Arrest of Zahara Lateef	Former television presenter jailed for two months for scalding a FDW with a jug of hot water
2002	Remittances protests	Chinese construction workers protest outside Parliament and file a civil suit after being defrauded
2005	Chan Yow Kuen case	Employer convicted of abusing FDW having already received two warnings from employment agency
2007	Madame Masselly case	Local family convicted and sentenced to vary jail terms for “systematic torture” of Indonesian FDW
2010	Chan Huey Fern case	Local employer sentenced to 27 months in jail for abusing Indonesian FDW
2012	Sun Xu incident	Foreign talent scholar Sun Xu forced to pay a fine and do community service after calling Singaporeans “dogs” on social media
2012	Chinese bus drivers’ strike	Chinese bus drivers protest over receiving 30% less pay than Malaysian and Singaporean drivers
2012	Spate of deaths by falling	Nine deaths of FDWs as a result of falling from high windows in the first half of 2012 push the Ministry of Manpower to address the problem
2013	Little India Riots	Riots in Little India after foreign labourer knocked down by a bus driven by a Singaporean
2014	Wong Pui Kwan case	Singaporean employer sentenced for abusing and docking the wages of an Indonesian and a Myanmar

		FDW
2014	First Migrant Workers Poetry Competition	NGO TWC2 gains widespread publicity by running poetry competition for migrant workers
2014	Anton Casey incident	British “foreign talent” Anton Casey fired and forced to leave the country after criticising Singapore online
2015	Foreign construction worker praised for rescuing toddler	Construction worker Shanmuganathan becomes online hero for rescuing toddler stuck on balcony
2016	Killing of Piang Ngaih Don	Singaporean mother and daughter stand trial for killing Myanmar FDW
2016	Sonny Truyen firing	Australian foreign talent fired after criticizing Singapore on social media and sparking public anger
2016	Olympic ping pong team debate	Widespread debate over Singapore’s fielding of an entirely Chinese-born foreign talent ping pong team at the Rio Olympics
2016	Trial of Lim Choon Hong and Chong Sui Foon	Singaporean couple plead guilty to starving and abusing FDW Thelma Oyasan Gwaidan
2016	Condo pool letter incident	Netizen outrage following the publication of a letter sent by a condo management board reminding residents that FDWs are not permitted to use the swimming pool