

## **More can be done to address foreign workers' social, emotional needs: NGOs**

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SINGAPORE: Observers Channel NewsAsia spoke with said foreign workers' well-being in Singapore has improved over the years, with tougher laws against errant employers.

Advocates recognise that the state of foreign workers' welfare has generally improved.

Laws have been enhanced to better protect such workers.

But what has lagged, they said, is a focus on their emotional and social needs.

Leong Chan Hoong, deputy head of social lab at Institute of Policy Studies, said: "A lot of the effort in the last few years has been devoted to a functional type of integration. Meaning to say so long as they know how to use the ATM, they know how to get their groceries, they know how to get medical attention if they have to, they will be fine.

"I think we have probably paid too much attention to the functional part and less so to the emotional needs and for a long time we assume that the transient workers who are here for a short time, and what they do will not have an impact on the social fabric of Singapore."

As a small city-state, Singapore is reliant on foreign workers, and more so in some sectors, compared to others.

About a third of the country's total workforce is made up of foreigners - 1,085,700 as of June 2013, excluding foreign domestic workers.

Over the years, various initiatives have been introduced to reduce dependence on these workers.

The initiatives include increasing levies and raising the qualifying salaries for semi-skilled and skilled workers.

About 70 per cent of foreign workers in Singapore are on work permits.

These are transient workers, semi or lower-skilled, and working in sectors like construction or cleaning.

The rest are on S-Pass - mid-level skilled manpower such as associate professionals and technicians and, Employment Pass holders - higher-skilled foreign professionals, such as managers, executives and specialists.

With events like the illegal strike in 2012 by bus drivers from China and more recently, the riot in Little India, the next step is how and how far Singapore can go in meeting foreign workers' social and emotional needs.

Dr Leong said: "We have to be realistic. Most of them would not become permanent residents or Singapore citizens and they know it, but they can still become a stakeholder in this country. Being a stakeholder means they know the right things to do and they will not engage in activities that will disrupt the peace and harmony. So if you feel that you are responsible to the people, to the place, that's one kind of social and emotional engagement."

Various NGOs are already stepping up efforts to address this.

The Migrant Workers' Centre (MWC) was set up in 2009. It is a collaboration between the labour movement and the Singapore National Employer's Federation. Its mission is to champion fair employment practices and the well-being of migrant workers in Singapore.

Since its set-up, the centre has reached out to some 400,000 workers and helped about 9,000.

Most of the cases it sees involve workplace grievances and salary disputes.

Moving ahead, the centre has identified three areas it wants to work on this year.

The first is a sectoral model employment contract that lists basic employment terms and conditions. This is to address malpractices among some intermediary employment agencies.

The second is placement and job matching services for workers whose contracts have ended, are laid off or are temporarily out of jobs, because of pending claims or disputes with employers.

The third is a push for a structured skills qualification and certification framework, to enhance the quality of migrant workers in Singapore.

Yeo Guat Kwang, chairman of MWC, said: "I think it's important for us to only keep the better (workers). We have to help the employers keep the better migrant workers so I think we should come up with a skills qualification framework for any worker who may want to continue to work here after the two-year work permit term. They should show proof that they have upped their skills and they have better skills certification."

There is currently no skills qualification framework specifically for those on work permits.

They are eligible for Workforce Skills Qualifications, but employers do not get training subsidies for them.

But some companies have found that investing in migrant workers is a win-win situation.

34-year-old Masud Rana is from Bangladesh.

He came to Singapore seven and a half years ago to work as a cleaner.

Through an in-house training programme, he is now a foreman.

He said he never imagined he could work his way up.

Mr Rana said he is happy working in Singapore to make a better life for his wife and two children back home.

Dennis Tan, general manager of LS 2 Services, said: "(The workers) are here to make money and then send the money back to their hometown. So we treat them fairly. We provide accommodation, in-house training. And then recently we had a year-end party, for both our Singaporean and foreign workers, it's to show our appreciation for their hard work. We want to make them feel more at home, to feel like they are working in a big family."

Efforts are also underway to improve worker welfare beyond the workplace.

NGOs said workers ultimately need more than just decent accommodation.

Bridget Tan, founder and CEO of Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), said: "I cannot fault the physical environment of that dormitory that I visited but I felt that maybe there could be a clinic for them, a counselling clinic where counsellors can be by them, for them to express their fears, anxieties worries for their families."

To this end, MWC has piloted a buddy system at several dormitories as a form of formal feedback mechanism for aggrieved workers.

The centre has likened it to a grassroots initiative and hopes to introduce the system to all 48 purpose-built dormitories by the end of the year.

There have also been calls to spread out recreational nodes for workers.

Assoc Prof Tan Khee Giap, co-director of Asia Competitiveness Institute, said: "Certainly I think to put them in a dense city, in concentrated area, by a particular foreign ethnic group, I think that's a time bomb we should not repeat."

We should create a decent environment for foreign workforce to be outside the core of our city in other parts of the island that can help diffuse some of the bottlenecks and our infrastructure, our MRT and also I think it'll be a better environment."

But observers said Singaporeans will then have to accept such workers living and playing closer to their homes.

One way to forge ties, they said, is to involve them in the community.

Located within an industrial estate but just a street away from some residential flats in Jurong, Soon Lee recreation centre offers a range of facilities from shops, sporting facilities, to even a beer garden for foreign workers in Singapore.

There are four of such centres in Singapore.

Together with the MWC, NGOs like HOME also partner dormitories to conduct recreational activities for workers.

People whom Channel NewsAsia spoke with said there is no such thing as finding that sweet spot when it comes to relations between Singaporeans and foreign workers, but respect and understanding can be built.

**- CNA/xq**