

Room for Improvement in Conditions for Migrant Workers in Singapore: Analysts

Loke Kok Fai

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Singapore: The latest Foreign Worker Survey findings paint a rosy picture of work in Singapore, but some analysts said it can be improved.

A large majority - about nine out of 10 - are satisfied with working here and would recommend it to others. However, key reasons - such as providing a sense of security and good job prospects - have slipped for Work Pass (WP) and S Pass holders since 2011.

The percentage of WP holders citing good working prospects as a reason dipped sharply, down from 52.8 per cent in 2011 to 19 per cent in 2014. The percentage of S Pass holders doing so almost halved - from 33.3 per cent in 2011 to 16.6 per cent in 2014.

Respondents were also less likely to cite a sense of security as a key reason, down from 39.1 per cent in 2011 to 35.4 per cent in 2014 for WP holders, and 55.8 per cent in 2011 to 39.1 per cent in 2014 for S Pass holders.

Among those who would not recommend Singapore as a place to work, a higher percentage gave reasons such as expensive employment agency fees and poor working conditions. The percentage of WP holders feeling that employment agency fees were expensive went up from 24.3 per cent in 2011 to 40 per cent in 2014. S Pass holders felt otherwise, dropping from 23.6 per cent to 14.8 per cent.

But a higher percentage of WP and S Pass holders cited poorer working conditions, rising from 6.9 per cent in 2011 to 12.8 per cent in 2014 for WP holders, and 1.4 per cent in 2011 to 6.6 per cent in 2014 for S Pass holders.

MANPOWER MINISTRY "CONCERNED" ABOUT HIGH AGENCY FEES

Responding to Channel NewsAsia's queries, the Manpower Ministry said it is concerned about the high agency fees paid by foreign workers and will take necessary action against errant agencies. However, it is beyond the ministry's jurisdiction to regulate the recruitment practices in the workers' home countries.

The Employment Agencies (EA) Act caps the amount of agency fees that local EAs can charge workers - one month for each year of service, capped at two months' salary. EAs have to issue itemised receipts on services rendered and amount collected. They also have to refund at least half of agency fees collected from workers who are prematurely terminated within the first six months of employment.

The ministry added that where it finds instances where workers are cheated by agents in their home countries, it will bring these cases to the attention of the respective embassies or high commissions to ask that enforcement action be taken.

Referring to the survey results, analysts said improvement in conditions in the home countries of the foreign workers and competition from other economies in the region could also shape perspectives.

Mr Jolovan Wham, executive director of the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), said: "Each individual person also has a different idea about what good prospects mean, and each individual person also has a different idea of what it means to have good pay... If you talk about things like if they feel they have good prospects in Singapore, for instance, if you're only earning less than S\$50 a month in your country of origin, and you come to Singapore and you earn S\$300 a month - for some people, that could be good prospects."

Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, head of the social lab at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that competition was also a factor: "This is a very competitive environment, and we cannot always be presumptuous that everybody wants to come here even if we allow them to come here."

Assoc Prof Tan added that with the economies of foreign-worker source countries such as India on the rise, workers may be offered improved working conditions and decide to stay home.