

We need a breakthrough in the conversation on labour rights for foreign domestic workers

In order to truly advance the conversation on foreign domestic workers (FDWs), we must break away from the current stereotypes of FDWs that sustain the inequality, say two psychology experts from the National University of Singapore.

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SINGAPORE: Recent debate about Singaporeans' treatment of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) reveal a significant degree of resistance against raising the standards of FDWs' work conditions, specifically when it comes to wage, welfare and living arrangements.

Some argue that FDWs are already paid a lot more in Singapore compared to their home countries, so there is no need to do more. Others say FDWs had voluntarily signed up for this role and should therefore accept the corresponding living conditions that come with it.

Still, others lament that they cannot afford to allow their FDWs to go on so many days off as they need help around the house.

While these may be valid arguments, they reflect an underlying thread that critics have pointed out – the lack of empathy, and the unequal standards applied to the FDWs in terms of labour rights. Why so?

STEREOTYPES PERSIST

Social psychological research on stereotypes have shown that generalised perceptions of groups in societies serve to justify systems and their policies, albeit implicitly.

The lack of empathy towards, and the unequal standards applied to the rights of FDWs, are seen as a result of underlying stereotypical perceptions of this group in society.

Groups in society are generally evaluated on two broad dimensions of warmth and competence.

Groups high in warmth not posing significant threat to the in-group ("us") are generally seen as cooperative and without mutually exclusive or competing goals.

Groups high in competence usually enjoy a higher socio-economic status and are seen to possess the capability necessary to achieve their goals.

Based on this framework, migrant worker groups, including FDWs, typically fall within the high warmth but low competence category. Groups in this category tend to be marginalised in society.

At the interpersonal level, this can come in the form of avoidance of meaningful contact, or the lack of a desire to understand them as fellow human beings with similar aspirations, needs and concerns - reflecting a lack of empathy some have towards FDWs.

On a larger level, this can also be seen in the disparity between treatment towards the favoured in-group and the marginalised outgroup – for instance, differences in labour rights, which is a reflection of unequal standards applied to FDWs.

Although marginalised groups have also been shown to evoke a desire in others to help them, driven by emotions such as empathy or sympathy, help given tends to be limited and unsubstantial.

This is driven by intergroup dynamics whereby any help rendered to an out-group cannot be seen to compromise the in-group's needs or goals, lest it threatens the in-group. "I feel for them but I don't really want to do too much about it, especially if it means less for me" is a typical subconscious response.

TRAPPED, NEEDING BREAKTHROUGH

The stereotypes surrounding migrant groups such as FDWs thus trap them in a marginalised position, making it difficult for conversation regarding their labour rights to really achieve a breakthrough, beyond the debate that has focused on whether FDWs should get "more" welfare or compensation - which typically is perceived as "less" for the employers.

In order to truly advance the conversation on FDWs, there is therefore a need to break away from the current stereotypes of FDWs that sustain the inequality – in other words, a re-branding of FDWs is necessary.

In psychological terms, this means increasing the public perception of competence of these workers, raising their stature in society from being marginalised to being recognised.

One way this can be achieved is through a re-design of our domestic service industry, to allow FDWs to become a professional source of labour in their own right. Instead of FDWs, future employers will be engaging the services of professional caregiving and/or housekeeping service providers.

This is akin to engaging air-con services, plumbing services, or confinement nannies – each representing its own specialised labour – to address household needs. Freelance cleaning services represent a smaller scale version of this proposed model.

For this option to materialise, extensive training and re-designing of the current industry is necessary; professional housekeepers and caregivers must possess the necessary skillsets to perform their roles.

Although ambitious, this may not be unrealistic given our ageing population. Indeed, researchers from the Institute of Policy Studies have proposed that FDWs who are assigned to provide care should undergo comprehensive training to equip them with the necessary skills for caregiving activities, in order to cope with the demands of the work.

Furthermore, having such a model that could allow for a pooled system of domestic service providers may lead to a more efficient distribution of resources.

By raising the stature of FDWs, there may be a risk this group would be perceived as less warm, in that they may be seen to compete economically with local industries.

However, this trade-off is necessary if we want to bring the discussion on FDWs' labour rights to a more equal footing. The alternative is to continue in stalemate.

Overall, a re-examination of FDWs as a professional labour force not only addresses future contingencies necessitated by our ageing population, but more importantly, overcomes the social psychological challenges faced by the marginalised migrant worker force that hinders the achievement of a more equitable society.

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