

Maid for work-life balance? Think again

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Foreign worker levies will be raised over the next three years in a bid to make Singapore less reliant on foreign labour.

But the authorities have been silent so far on the maid levy. It remains at \$265 or \$170 for employers who satisfy certain conditions.

Foreign domestic workers here, who number more than 190,000, care for their employers' children and elderly parents, and help manage homes on behalf of working women. According to figures based on the 2008 Report on Labour Force in Singapore, married women made up 57.7 per cent of the labour force, an increase of about 2 per cent over the previous year.

It has been often asserted that maids are crucial in enabling Singaporean women to remain a part of the workforce. While encouraging women to work has a range of benefits - such as ensuring their financial independence and making sure they are represented in various spheres of influence - these gains come at a heavy cost. They reinforce Singaporean women's dependence on the labour of other women, and perpetuate the notion that caregiving is a woman's responsibility, not that of a man.

While having an extra pair of hands at home gives Singapore parents some quality time, the number of foreign domestic workers should not be allowed to grow unabated. If nothing else, children who grow up with maids as their main caregivers may end up with poor social values.

More critically, the status quo hardly encourages employees and employers to think of ways to work smart. With maids shouldering the burden of housekeeping and caregiving, bosses may not feel the need to help workers achieve work-life harmony.

According to a survey by the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants of some 700 women professionals last year, almost 60 per cent cited work-life balance as a top priority. Among them, 75 per cent said they had to put in longer hours at work compared with a year ago. In the latest report by the International Labour Organisation, Singapore led the pack on the number of hours put in at work, surpassing developed economies such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

Since 2005, the Government and the labour movement have introduced a substantial number of family-friendly initiatives to reduce the need for maids while providing quality care for dependants. The number of childcare centres has increased from 713 in 2005 to 807 today. In the same period, the number of infant care centres has doubled from 79 to 166. Recently, the National Trades Union Congress re-energised its Back2Work With U programme to match women with job openings in certain sectors known to offer greater work-life flexibility.

But despite these efforts, the number of maids here has increased by 46,000 since 2005. By the end of last year, there was one maid for every five households. The number of maids,

comprising nearly 4 per cent of Singapore's total population, is expected to continue to rise as the economy recovers and more women enter the job market.

All this suggests that facilities such as childcare and elderly care centres are necessary but not sufficient to achieve work-life balance. Employees need to communicate to their bosses the effect long working hours have on family life. And instead of relying on maids, workers should explore other arrangements for their dependants.

On their part, employers should acknowledge they have a role to play in promoting family life. Where feasible, they should introduce staggered or shorter working hours, and more flexible family leave arrangements for employees who need to look after their dependants. Efforts to create a better work-life balance can pay off in terms of a happier and more loyal workforce.

To reduce Singapore's reliance on foreign domestic workers, employers must become part of the solution.

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