

6.1 Foreign Maids in Singapore

Today Singapore is one of Southeast Asia's most dynamic economies. It relies heavily on migrant workers, most of whom are admitted only on a temporary basis and under quite restrictive rules. An important aspect of Singapore's labour market policy is the recruitment of foreign female domestic workers.

The Singaporean Government introduced the Foreign Maid Scheme in 1978 to encourage the participation of local women in the formal economy. Migrant domestic workers are admitted on two-year visas, under very strict controls. Employers have to pay a monthly levy to regulate demand (US\$179 in 2005) and a security bond to ensure departure (US\$2953 in 2005). Maids have to undergo medical check-ups before entry and every six months, with mandatory deportation if they contract sexual diseases or become pregnant. Marriage with Singaporeans or permanent residents is illegal. Maids are excluded from labour and social legislation and have few rights (Abdul Rahman et al., 2005: 238-9). Employers must take out accident insurance since maids are not covered by the workers compensation scheme (Yeoh, 2007).

Domestic service leads to isolation and vulnerability for young women migrants, who often have little protection against the demands of their employers (Lim and Oishi, 1996). The 'foreign maid' issue has become a key public topic in Singapore, triggered sometimes by cases of abuse, but also by negative stereotypes of foreign domestic workers. Filipinas are seen as hard-working, capable, and good English speakers, but also as unreliable and assertive. Indonesians and Sri Lankans are seen as less capable, but also less demanding (Abdul Rahman et al., 2005: 243).

In 1996, following the Flor Contemplacion affair (see Philippines case study) the Philippine Government temporarily stopped migration of maids to Singapore. The private employment agencies turned to Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Even after the Philippine ban was dropped, the trend to recruit workers from the other countries continued: the ready availability especially of Indonesian women allowed the agencies to charge them exploitative fees, while employers paid lower wages. By 2004 there estimated to be about 140 000 foreign domestic workers, of whom up to 70 000 were from the Philippines, 12 000 from Sri Lanka and 60 000 from Indonesia (Abdul Rahman et al., 2005: 237).

References

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