

# M E D I A R E L E A S E

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## APPLAUDING A MANDATORY DAY OFF FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS

**Singapore, Monday, 5 March 2012** – We applaud the government on requiring a rest day per week for foreign domestic workers (FDWs) receiving or renewing their work permit after 1 Jan 2013. A weekly day off is an internationally recognized right for workers, and we praise MOM for championing this issue through wide ranging consultations culminating in the new requirement. It is simply the right thing to do, and a win-win for workers and Singaporeans. The move will help Singapore attract qualified domestic workers who do a great deal to support our economic progress. What better news could we have received in the week leading up to International Women's Day on March 8! UN Women globally works to further women's empowerment, and we campaign on behalf of vulnerable women, among those migrant women who leave their communities and countries to make a better living abroad.

“As Singapore is one of the last countries to give a weekly rest day to FDWs, we are happy to note that Singapore is taking a significant step forward towards matching domestic laws and policies with international labour standards” say Trina Liang Lin, President of the Singapore Committee for UN Women. Last year, the International Labour Organisation adopted the Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, an international Convention which sets a framework for domestic worker rights and includes a weekly day off.

This is nearing the end of a long journey for us - the Singapore Committee for UN Women (formerly known as UNIFEM Singapore), and long-standing non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) and Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) launched the 'Day Off' educational campaign on Labour Day 2008 to encourage employers to give their FDW a regular day off and calls for legislative backing by government for this. Through websites, viral marketing, movie screenings, school talks, face-to-face

public education and publication of joint research, we have worked tirelessly to help employers see the benefit of giving their domestic workers a rest day.

Approximately 206,000 migrant women are currently employed in Singapore as domestic workers and 1 in 5 Singapore families currently hire one. A day off is critical in creating and maintaining a positive working relationship between employer and employee. It can improve morale and productivity and most importantly empower the domestic worker as an individual. And with so much focus on the importance of a work life balance for all kinds of workers - the campaign is really only asking people to treat others as they would wish to be treated themselves.

The legal framework covering FDWs has improved significantly in the city-state since the mid-1980s when, as part of an economic policy dubbed the Second Industrial Revolution, the government liberalised its immigration policies to admit more FDWs. This was to facilitate and raise the participation of local women in the workforce. The government has preferred a social educational approach together with incremental adjustments to employment legislation, which have noticeably improved protections for FDWs. Now, a weekly rest day becomes a legal right, which does not depend on the goodwill of the employer.

The Singapore Committee for UN Women (formerly known as UNIFEM Singapore), Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) and Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) have also collaborated on a quantitative study on attitudes towards giving FDWs a day off released last year. The 70-page research paper funded by the International Labor Organisation (ILO) titled *Made to Work: Attitudes towards Granting Regular Days off to Migrant Domestic Workers*, forms part of a wider 'Day Off' educational campaign launched by the NGOs in 2008 to encourage employers to give their FDW a regular day off and calls for legislative backing by government for this.

The report notes that there is relatively little public data on the working conditions of FDWs and virtually no information on the attitudes of non-employers on their views on the working conditions for FDWs including such issues as a day off for migrant workers. This report, therefore, helps to fill these data gaps. The other distinguishing feature of this research is that it surveyed a representative random sample of Singapore households. In all, valid survey responses were collected from 582 households.

Key findings of the research note that while FDWs work an average of 14 hours per day, only 12% have at least one day off per week. Employers who give their FDW a day off tend to couch it in terms of employment rights while those who do not give their FDW a day off express the fear that the FDW may fall into bad company. Among other issues surveyed (and the report varied rather more widely than focussing purely on the day off), over 70% of the respondents who do not employ a FDW shared the view that FDWs should be given a weekly day off.

Our main recommendation was addressed with the new mandatory rest day for FDWs. We now hope that employers will take the new regulation and the message it carries to heart, and not try to make the domestic worker give up the right to a rest day in return for the one extra day's cash compensation, unless that is the domestic worker's own choice. We also hope that the employment agencies will promote the new requirement, as they could become an important mediator between the two parties. A Day Off improves morale and productivity of the employee and the working relationship between employer and employee. It also gives the FDW the opportunity to use their free time to learn new skills, acquire knowledge and be empowered as individuals.

Managing change takes time and preparation. Sometimes new mindsets need to be adopted too. Services and social support networks need to be enhanced. We will be walking hand in hand with the government and fellow NGOs to promote the new requirement to employers, domestic workers and the general public as part of this new phase of our Day Off public education campaign.

It will be a happy International Women's Day for Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore this year!

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Report reference:

The National Committee for UN Women Singapore; Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics & Transient Workers Count Too (2010), *Made to Work: Employers' Attitudes towards Granting Regular Days Off to Migrant Domestic Workers*, Singapore: The National Committee for UN Women Singapore; HOME & TWC2.

**"The National Committee for UN Women Singapore (formerly known as UNIFEM Singapore)** is a non-profit organisation working towards women's empowerment and gender equality through a wide range of public education programs, membership events and resource mobilization activities. Established in 1999, it supports programs that provide women and children with access to education, healthcare, economic independence and a life free of violence and abuse. ([www.unwomen-nc.org.sg](http://www.unwomen-nc.org.sg))"

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