

MEDIA RELEASE

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NGOs CALL FOR MANDATORY DAY OFF FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS

Singapore, Friday, 24 June 2011 –A weekly day off is an internationally recognised right for workers and has long been established as an employment norm. Singapore however, a nation which employs approximately 200,000 foreign domestic workers (FDW), continues to stand apart by the absence of a regular legislated day off for FDWs.

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. However, a weekly day off for FDWs remains an optional benefit dependent on the goodwill of employers rather than a legal right.

In the wake of evidence that FDWs work an average of 14 hours a day with many putting in even longer days, the question of a regular day off should not be left to the vagaries of the market. The National Committee for UN Women, Singapore (formerly known as UNIFEM Singapore), and long-standing non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) and Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) have collaborated on a quantitative study on employers' attitudes towards giving their FDW a day off.

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.

“Since our respective inception, we have been campaigning for mandatory days off for domestic workers. The purpose of the research was to take stock of our efforts and calibrate where employers are in terms of current practice, as well as better understand the attitudes towards a day off

of the general public who do not currently employ an FDW,," said Mr Jolovan Wham, HOME Executive Director, a member of the team involved in the research.

The report notes that there is relatively little public data on the working conditions of migrant domestic workers 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.

"The research is helpful in that it throws light on various aspects of the current state of employment of FDWs in Singapore including practices and attitudes towards a day off for FDWs. It should be a call to action for policymakers, academics and employers, as well as prospective employers to improve the working conditions of FDWs," remarked Ms Jacqueline Loh, an Executive Committee member of the National Committee for UN Women, Singapore (formerly known as UNIFEM Singapore) who was also part of the research team.

The report makes nine focussed, but detailed, policy recommendations:

- Make a weekly day off mandatory but allow FDWs to opt to work for their employer on their day off in return for fair compensation.
- The law should restrict FDWs from signing away more than 50% of their days off in a given month in return for cash compensation. This will prevent undue influence being brought to bear on the worker and ensure the FDW has access to assistance if required.
- Provide FDWs with the same legal protections as all other low wage workers in Singapore.
- Repeal security conditions that make employers responsible for observing work permit conditions of FDWs under their employ..
- Provide rights-based education for employers.

- Enhance education for employers on employer-employee relationships and stress management.
- Promote social support networks for FDWs.
- Promote social support networks for employers of FDWs.
- Improve the professionalism and support functions of employment agencies engaged in FDW placements.

“In releasing the report at this time, we hope that the new Manpower Minister, will, together with the Ministry, recognise that the issue is one of basic employment justice and will be more open to re-examining the day off question. Migrant labour NGOs, both at home and internationally, view the day off as the cornerstone of a better set of rights that should be available to FDWs,” TWC2 Vice-President, Dr Noorashikin Abdul Rahman, a polytechnic lecturer, noted.

The report is timely, given that the International Labour Organisation has earlier this month 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.

The three NGOS responsible for the research recommend the Singapore government reviews domestic laws and policies to match international labour standards. Mr Wham noted, “The benefit to Singapore as a whole, where a foreign domestic worker is employed in one in five households, would be incalculable.”

Singapore’s reputation as an attractive labour destination may well become tarnished if its legislative protections for FDWs continue to lag behind international best practice. As a nation that depends of a steady inflow of overseas workers to support its economic progress, it cannot afford to tarry too long.

– E N D O F R E L E A S E –

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 in developing countries. 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)

Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) is a Singaporean society established in 2004 to respond to the special needs of migrant communities. It provides direct assistance to migrant workers, and victims of human trafficking and forced labour as well as social integration services and research and education. (www.home.org.sg)

Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) is a Singaporean society concerned with the wellbeing of low-waged migrant workers. Established in 2003, it promotes the rights and welfare of workers and good relations between migrant workers and employers through advocacy and public education, research, and direct welfare services. (www.twc2.org.sg)

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