



Media Release

SMU study reveals challenges and emotional distress faced by migrant workers in Singapore

New research finds that migrant workers affected by housing, debts and threats of deportation could be under significant distress

Singapore, 4 November 2015 (Wednesday) – A study by researchers at the Singapore Management University (SMU) on the wellbeing of migrant workers in Singapore has revealed that 62 per cent of surveyed workers with an injury or salary claim with the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and 13 per cent of surveyed regular workers are likely to suffer from serious mental illness.

The research identified that the main drivers of emotional distress amongst workers surveyed were the threats of deportation from employers, agent fee debt, and lack of housing for workers who have run away from their employers.

The research co-author, SMU School of Social Sciences' Assistant Professor of Sociology Nicholas Harrigan said, "We were particularly surprised by the prevalence of emotional distress amongst injured workers. The high rates of threats of deportation amongst workers with injury and salary claims with MOM was also worrying. If workers fear deportation, it makes them much less likely to report mistreatment."

Numbering nearly one million persons or a third of the local workforce, it is crucial to understand the welfare issues confronting low-paid migrant workers. The findings from this study on this vital yet vulnerable group could have socio-economic impact on Singapore.

The study authored by SMU School of Social Sciences' Assistant Professor of Sociology Nicholas Harrigan and SMU alumna Koh Chiu Yee was launched with a presentation and panel discussion at SMU. The panellists included senior representatives from Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), and Silver Ribbon Singapore which promotes positive mental health.

This study is part of the Social Insight Research Series of reports on unmet social needs in Singapore, driven by the Lien Centre of Social Innovation under SMU.

Key Findings

Threats of deportation

Sixty-four per cent of workers with an injury or salary claim with MOM said that they had been

threatened with deportation by their employer. These workers were 50 per cent more likely to suffer from serious mental illness than a worker not threatened. Ten per cent of regular workers reported that their employers threatened to deport them back to their home countries. These workers were five times more likely to suffer from a serious mental illness.

Agent fee debts

Unpaid agent fee debt was one of the main causes of serious mental illness amongst regular work permit holders. Approximately 7 per cent of regular workers reported that they were in debt because they have not completed repaying their agent fees. This debt doubled their chances of having a serious mental illness.

Housing

Ninety per cent of workers with an injury or salary claim with MOM said that they no longer lived with their employer. Those workers were nearly twice as likely to suffer from serious mental illness.

Recommendations

The Ministry of Manpower has a number of policies that address some of these problems. For example, the law requires employers to provide accommodation to workers who have injury and salary claims, and it is an offence under the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act to repatriate workers with outstanding claims.

However, the report makes a number of recommendations about areas for further improvement.

The study proposes that MOM explores direct or indirect provision of accommodation for injured workers who have run away from their employers. The study also recommends that the Singapore government explores licensing and regulating migration agents in sending countries. The study points out examples such as countries like New Zealand and corporate companies like Capella Hotels and Resorts that have policies that do this.

The study states that employers' threats of deportation could be significantly less damaging if Work Permit holders were guaranteed access to the 30-day Short Term Visit Pass (STVP) upon termination of their work passes. According to current policies, Work Permit holders must leave the country within seven days of termination, whereas Employment Pass and S Pass holders are generally granted the privilege of 30 days.

Assistant Prof Harrigan added, "While regular Work Permit holders are generally mentally healthy, agent fee debt weighs heavily on the mind of the newly-arrived workers. It would be good if the Singapore government looked at ways of regulating these fees in sending countries. The New Zealand government and Capella Hotels and Resorts both have codes of conduct, licensing, and penalties for migration agents in sending countries. This can dramatically lower agent fees if implemented correctly.

About 10 per cent of regular workers report being threatened with deportation. Assistant Prof Harrigan said that the close link between their visas and work contracts means that often their employer can make a credible threat to deport workers. He suggested allowing workers to change employers without employer permission, and giving workers the access to the 30-day STVP to help reduce the danger that such threats pose to workers' mental health. "These workers have invested a

lot in coming to Singapore, and if their employer can liquidate this investment by deporting a worker in just a few days, it gives the employer tremendous power. Unfortunately it seems that some employers abuse this authority," he said.

Over 2,000 South Asian Work Permit holders come through a local soup kitchen run by non-profit organisation Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) in Little India each year. Ninety percent of these workers are no longer living with their employers. "Many have run away saying they fear being deported for making salary or injury claims. It is important for these workers to have access to alternative accommodation. The government could look at providing this accommodation directly or indirectly. Expecting employers, whom workers are lodging a complaint against, to provide such accommodation is not a realistic option," concluded Assistant Prof Harrigan.

About the Study

The study of 801 South Asian migrant workers, mostly from the construction and marine sectors, was conducted in Little India in 2013 and 2014.

The study progressed in two stages: the first was a survey of 605 workers in August 2015. Approximately half of these workers had an injury and salary claims registered with MOM. These workers were recruited from the soup kitchen run by TWC2. The other half of these workers were regular worker permit holders interviewed on the streets of Little India.

The second study was a set of qualitative interviews with 196 workers, mostly at the soup kitchen of TWC2. These interviews explored how and why threats of repatriation took place, and why workers were running away from their employers when they had injury and salary claims.

The study measured the psychological distress of these men using the Kessler 6 scale that is designed by Harvard University Professor Ronald Kessler and used in large scale national health surveys in more than 13 countries, including the United States. The authors correlated this distress measure with over 40 socio-economic variables.

It should be noted that there are limitations which qualify the findings of our study. First, the injury and salary claim workers (who make up half our sample for stage 1 of the study and most of our sample for stage 2) represent less than one percent of migrant workers in Singapore, so the problems of this group cannot necessarily be generalised to the larger migrant worker population. The injury and salary claim workers are, at best, representative of the experiences of the approximately 2,000 injury and salary claim workers who pass through the TWC2 soup kitchen each year. Second, the sampling strategy we used was not random, and thus we cannot guarantee that our survey is statistically representative of the larger population. These caveats point to the need for further research in this area.

To download this report or other LCSi publications, or for more information on LCSi, please visit www.lcsi.smu.edu.sg

For more information on MOM's passes and permits, please visit <http://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits>

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Enclosures:

1: The sample for the survey

2: An example of a migrant worker in emotional distress

3: Proportion of workers meeting screening criteria for serious mental illness

4: Proportion of workers reporting being threatened with repatriation by their employer

5: Rates of serious mental illness amongst regular migrant workers threatened with repatriation

6: Why does agent fee debt cause emotional distress? This story explains why.

7: How could Singapore regulate the agent fees paid in sending countries? The case study of Capella Hotels and Resorts provides an example. Capella halved the agent fees paid by its employers by regulating agents in sending countries.

Enclosure 1: The sample for the survey

605

SOUTH ASIAN MIGRANT WORKERS

261



REGULAR MIGRANT WORKERS:

Work Permit Holders
Recruited from
the streets of Little India

344



INJURY AND SALARY CLAIM CASES:

**Individuals with injury and salary claim
cases registered with MOM**
Recruited from 'The Cuff Road Project'
food programme in Little India

Enclosure 2: An example of a migrant worker in emotional distress

Summary: Palani went \$10,000 into debt to move to Singapore. He suffered a substantial injury to his head due to dangerously fast work conditions. His employer threatened him for not returning to work, and he eventually ran away fearing his employer would use “gangsters”³¹ to repatriate him. A year after the accident, he is still in considerable pain and his injury claim with MOM is not resolved, though MOM has forced his employer to pay his medical bills. Palani cannot wait to return home. He said that he wants to deconstruct the glamorous image of Singapore that draws workers to this country every year.

Palani sold his business in India for \$10,000 to move to Singapore and get a construction job. He supports his wife, mother, and son. He used to be paid about \$900 per month, and would send back about \$400 to \$500 per month to his family.

About a year ago, Palani had an accident at work where a large metal block struck his head. He said this happened because his supervisor was making the workers complete dangerous work at a fast pace. His employer took him to hospital and he was treated, but then his supervisor threatened to deduct \$50 per day in pay if he didn't return to work. He went back to work despite being in pain. However, eventually it was too much and he left his job a month later.

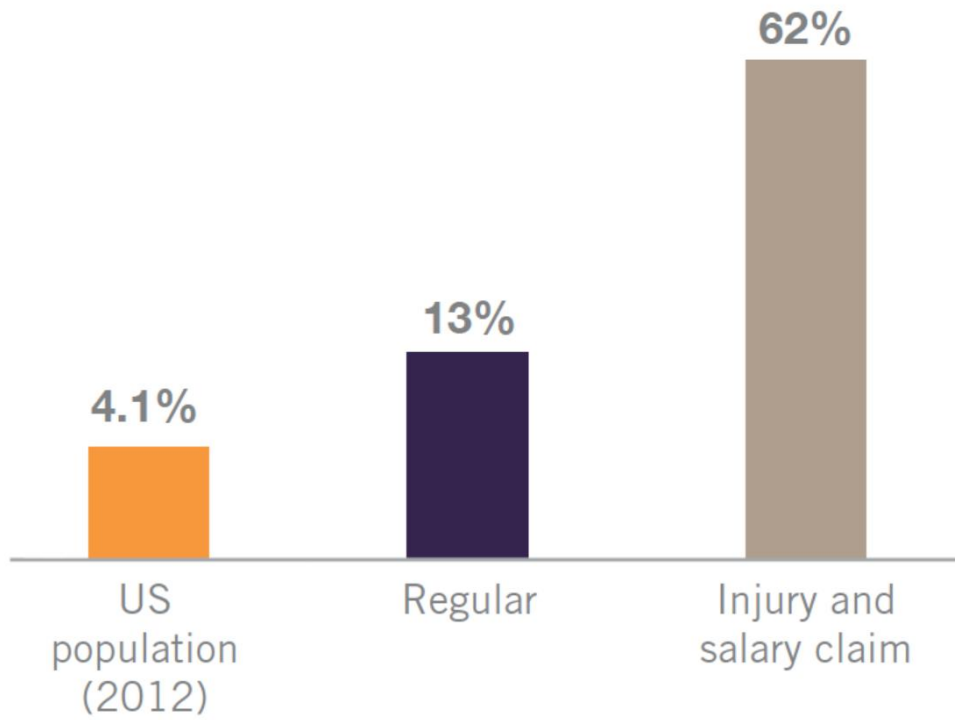
Palani then registered his injury claim with MOM. He voluntarily left his employer's housing, fearing that if he stayed there, his supervisor would threaten him even more. In fact, he had heard that his supervisor was planning to use gangsters to get him to return home, should he take action.

He now lives with his friends in their house. Although his medical condition (pain in his eye and head) hasn't improved considerably, he is happier and tension-free. The company has to cover his medical bills (because of MOM intervention), and he doesn't fear his supervisor any longer.

Throughout this time, he kept his emotional pain to himself, and would not talk about it to others. His family knows of his injury; however, they are unaware of all the legal proceedings. Palani cannot wait to return home. He said that he wants to deconstruct the glamorous image of Singapore that draws Indian workers to this country every year.

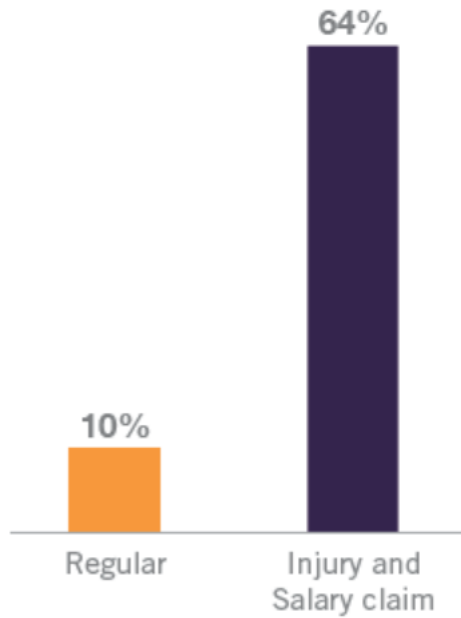
³¹ This is the term workers commonly use for the employees of repatriation agencies.

Enclosure 3: Proportion of workers meeting screening criteria for serious mental illness

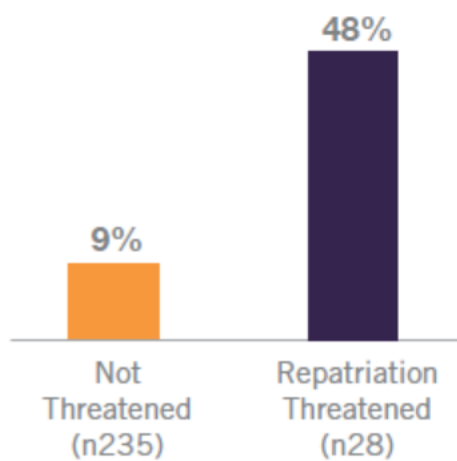


Our survey found that the level of emotional distress translated into a remarkably high rate of predicted prevalence of serious mental illness amongst workers with injury and salary claims with the Ministry of Manpower.

Enclosure 4: Proportion of workers reporting being threatened with repatriation by their employer



Enclosure 5: Rates of serious mental illness amongst regular migrant workers threatened with repatriation



Enclosure 6: Why does agent fee debt cause emotional distress? This story explains why.

This is Kabir's second time in Singapore working as a construction worker. This time round, he only had to pay \$3,200 in agent fees compared to the first time, when he paid \$7,000. His father helped him take a loan, out of which \$1,500 has yet to be paid back. If he is unable to pay back the loan, he has to sell his plot of land, leaving his joint family of over 20 people homeless; he may even be sent to prison.

Enclosure 7: How could Singapore regulate the agent fees paid in sending countries? The case study of Capella Hotels and Resorts provides an example. Capella halved the agent fees paid by its employers by regulating agents in sending countries.

In 2008, the Singapore company Capella Hotels and Resorts (then known as West Paces Hotel Group) commissioned a report which studied the recruitment practices and integration of migrant workers into the 4-star and 5-star hospitality sector.

The recommendations of the report were implemented with an international recruitment strategy for Work Permit holders, which aimed at removing exploitative fees and practices to better motivate employees to deliver quality work with full attention and commitment. Prior to the implementation of the programme, 82 per cent of employees were paying \$6,500 or more in agent fees, and 47 per cent were paying \$8,000 or more. The programme claimed to have approximately halved the agent fees for its employees in the first cohort.

Capella's strategy for halving agent fees involved signing agreements with model agents with a detailed code of conduct, including standardised agent fees. Agents who broke these agreements were denied further business until their practices reached an acceptable standard.

A Capella spokesperson said: "We endeavour to do our best to improve the lives of all team members whether Singaporean or foreign, and treat all staff fairly. We have terminated agreements with third parties who have not respected our commitments. We are not perfect but we continue to be vigilant to ensure that we always do the right thing by our people."

About the Lien Centre for Social Innovation

The Lien Centre for Social Innovation, a partnership between the Lien Foundation and Singapore Management University, was established in 2006 to advance the thinking and capability of the social sector.

The Centre strives to be a thought leader and catalyst for positive social change in Singapore and in the region. Through its research and publications, the Centre contributes to a more equitable, inclusive and vibrant society by addressing social needs through innovative approaches. It works at the intersection of the public, private and social sectors.

All publications by the Centre are available for download from the website at www.lcsi.smu.edu.sg

About Singapore Management University

A premier university in Asia, the Singapore Management University (SMU) is internationally recognised for its world-class research and distinguished teaching. Established in 2000, SMU's mission is to generate leading-edge research with global impact and produce broad-based, creative and entrepreneurial leaders for the knowledge-based economy. SMU education is known for its highly interactive, collaborative and project-based approach to learning, and for its technologically enabled pedagogy of seminar-style teaching in small class sizes.

Home to over 8,800 undergraduate and postgraduate students, SMU comprises six schools: School of Accountancy, Lee Kong Chian School of Business, School of Economics, School of Information Systems, School of Law, and School of Social Sciences. SMU offers a wide range of bachelors, masters and PhD degree programmes in the disciplinary areas associated with the six schools, as well as in interdisciplinary combinations of these areas.

SMU has an emphasis on generating rigorous, high-impact, and relevant multi-disciplinary research that addresses Asian issues of global relevance. SMU faculty members collaborate with leading international researchers and universities from USA, Europe, China and India, as well as with partners in the business community and public sector, through its research institutes, centres and labs. SMU's city campus is a state-of-the-art facility located in the heart of downtown Singapore, fostering strategic linkages with business, government and the wider community. www.smu.edu.sg

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