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Headline: How to address 3 distress factors for Singapore's migrant workers

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As Singapore braces for its worst ever recession, we can expect a surge in the number of migrant workers who will lose their jobs, some with months of unpaid salary as struggling employers go bust.

We don't know how many there will be, but we know one thing: These workers will be in distress.

Research published by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation in 2015, years before Covid-19 had a name, found that 62 per cent of 344 South Asian low- and semi-skilled male migrant workers in Singapore with injury and/or salary disputes were already in psychological distress.

This rate was almost five times higher than migrant workers with no such issues.

What were the causes for the distress? Housing problems, threat of repatriation and agent fee debt.

These problems persist, exacerbated by both a highly infectious disease that is not going away and the pain of separation from loved ones who are also struggling back home.

DUTY OF CARE

We owe these workers a duty of care. They are a vital but vulnerable part of society, supporting the economy in peacetime and enduring lockdown in a pandemic to keep the rest of Singapore safe. Thousands of them have also been infected with and are battling Covid-19.

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Yet, the humanity of the migrant worker — a son, a father, a partner and a friend — continues to be overshadowed by his economic utility, even in a health crisis. This has to change.

The Government has signalled Singapore's commitment to migrant workers' welfare, promising free medical care for infected workers and announcing detailed plans to raise dormitory standards after the crisis.

We're on the cusp of a potential sea change in Singapore's labour policies.

A good look at the longstanding distress factors confronting the migrant worker could shed light on the gaps in our employment system, and how we could close them.

HOUSING WOES

Migrant workers who have salary disputes often find themselves homeless after their employment relationship breaks down.

Employers are required to ensure acceptable housing for their workers until repatriation, but only 10 per cent of workers in the Lien Centre survey who had made injury and salary claims to the Ministry of Manpower against their employers were living in accommodation provided by the employers.

The 90 per cent who didn't showed significantly more distress.

Employers said these workers ran away so they could moonlight or live closer to the city. Workers on the other hand cited fears for their physical safety, or discomfort living in quarters provided by an employer they were claiming against.

Nearly two-thirds of workers who made injury and salary claims said their employers had threatened them with repatriation.

REPATRIATION THREATS

A low wage migrant worker often receives the short end of the stick in negotiations with his employer. The notice period for terminating a worker ranges from one day to four weeks, depending on the length of service.

When a work permit is cancelled, repatriation must happen within a week. A migrant worker simply does not have the time, network, and mobility to look for alternative work in Singapore.

At the same time, employers can hire other migrant workers as replacements. This puts considerable power in the hands of the employer to issue threats against workers.

The Lien Centre study also found a pervasive belief amongst workers that their employers can send them home at will, meaning threats from employers are often taken at face value.

Can Singapore delink work permit holders' visas and employment contracts, and allow workers to change employers?

This is a complex policy issue with many unanswered questions, but the Government's latest announcement that employers who wish to qualify for assistance must allow the Manpower Ministry to deploy their out-of-work workers to other companies could provide some answers.

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AGENT FEES

Eighty-one per cent of the 605 workers surveyed in the Lien Centre study paid an agent fee to come to Singapore, some forking out as much as S\$10,000. That's 20 months of earnings for a worker with a basic salary of S\$500.

Agent fees cover the legitimate and necessary services for the migration process.

But they can also include an exploitative portion driven by the information and power asymmetry between agents and workers, as well as the layering of middlemen in migrant workers' home countries each taking a cut of the pie.

The migration agents responsible for the bulk of exploitative fees are often beyond the reach of Singapore law.

Perhaps we could take a leaf from New Zealand's Immigration Advisers Licensing Act, which regulates both onshore and offshore agents, sets a code of conduct and has a disciplinary tribunal to enforce it.

The primary victims of exploitative agent fees are migrant workers, but these agent fees risk being imported into Singapore as corruption — in the form of kickbacks paid to employers.

Reports of errant employers taking money from workers in return for jobs periodically emerge. Convicted employers face stiff fines and up to two years jail, but non-governmental groups which help migrant workers still point to the prevalence of kickbacks in the construction industry.

Responsible employers can follow the lead of Capella Singapore, which was able to halve the agent fees of its migrant housekeeping staff when the hotel opened in 2009.

This was done by working with model agencies, setting a detailed code of conduct with standardised agent fees and denying business to agents who did not comply.

As the hotel's hiring limits were cut following sector-wide foreign worker quota reductions this year, it has also moved to direct hiring which does away with agent fees altogether.

Are government-linked companies, some of them Singapore's biggest migrant worker employers, doing the same, or better?

REPUTATION AND HYGIENE

There are important economic and political reasons why Singapore should care about the well-being of its migrant workers.

The causes of their psychological distress are associated with undesirable industry practices such as repatriation threats and agency fee debt, which undermine Singapore's reputation as a global economic hub.

The same distress factors are arguably behind workers' vulnerability to infection in a pandemic.

Indebtedness and skewed employer-employee power dynamics are part of what makes workers willing to tolerate poor hygiene, crowded housing and transport, or going to work sick, if that's what it takes to keep their job.

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CONSTRUCTIVE COLLABORATIONS

Since the coronavirus outbreak in migrant worker dormitories, the Government has stepped in with a mammoth support operation of some 3,000 personnel, including from the military and the police.

At the same time, aid groups have provided meals, essentials and counselling for workers during the circuit breaker, offering much needed resources to struggling dormitory operators and effectively supporting the Government's inter-agency task force.

The crisis shows that non-profits, businesses and the Government can pull together despite their traditional divisions to address problems as complex and pressing as a pandemic in a high-density environment.

This constructive collaboration is the most appropriate response and must continue after the circuit breaker ends because the problems of and around the well-being of our migrant workers will remain complex and pressing.

The true measure of a society lies in how it treats its most vulnerable members. If we want to measure up to our first world status, Singaporeans need to see the migrant worker as one of us, and all the time.

Our policies and attitudes must reflect that.

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