

HOME Away from Home—Social Support Network for Migrant Workers in Singapore

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They all have sad stories to tell. If you bother asking, one would tell you that she was charged for a theft that she did not commit. Another would confide that she was frequently starved and beaten by her madam. Yet another shared the story of how she was trapped into prostitution. Many other tragedies would surface if you bother to find out. But not many bother to ask. Even less who care. After all, “they” are just maids—the foreign, lowly, and othered pariahs of our society.

Foreign maids, like other migrant workers, are frequently subject to such discriminatory treatment from mainstream society. Carried to the extreme, it is not unusual for them to be abused and mistreated by their employers. Compounding this is the lack of sympathetic ears and friendly shoulders to cry on, which frequently results in desperate acts leading to tragic ends. In Singapore, cases of death sparked by such circumstances have increased in the past years, be it maid suicide, murder of maids, or murder of employers by their maids.

In response to the alarming increase of such cases, Singaporean Bridget Lew took it upon herself “to build the culture of welcome for the global family in Singapore.” She envisions Singapore, a nation forefathered by immigrants from China and India, to play host and provide a home to modern day migrants. A charitable organization initiated and run by an everyday heroine called HOME, or the Humanitarian Organization of Migration Economics was born in 2004.

Over the coming years, HOME quickly establishes itself as a crisis centre for distressed migrants in Singapore. Foreign domestic workers, construction workers and illegal sex workers are among its usual clientele, who are referred there by the authorities or by fellow migrant workers. In most cases, these workers suffer from some kind of hardship, running away from their abusive employers, or pending trials for crimes they have allegedly committed. In the shelters run by HOME, these migrants wait patiently—some for months, some up to a year—for justice.

But you cannot tell these if you just glimpse a visit to the “Grotto.” More likely, you will see young, vibrant, lively women (or men, depending on which Grotto you visit) in

their twenties doing handicraft, floral arrangement, dancing, singing, and worshipping. At times, they will stop to chat with one another, giggling as if sharing a secret privy to those lucky few. These were greetings in Tagalog with a rejoinder in Malay, while one or two Thai phrases sneak into the same conversation. But different tongues have never been a cause of communication breakdown here. If anything, they are testimony to the solidarity of this Global Family of HOME.

The ultimate goal of HOME, as is many other voluntary welfare organizations and religious bodies in Singapore, is to empower these migrant workers and provide them with opportunities to network with one another. This has resulted in the migrant workers in Singapore coming together and forming a support network of their own. Such initiatives are frequently supported by the embassy of the migrant's origin.

Indo Family, for example, was the brainchild of a certain Miss Nurifah Rasidi, an Indonesian domestic worker who has been working in Singapore for 8 years. The organization runs a weekend 24-hours helpline for fellow migrant workers in Singapore regardless of nationalities (although it mostly appeals to Indonesian workers due to the bond of language and culture). The "modus operandi" was via handphone, where the 'senior' maids with years of experience of working in Singapore would dispense free counseling and advice to their 'juniors.' They would also act as a referral point to the relevant organizations and/or authorities when the need arises.

HOME is but one example of community service by wom(a)n for women, even if they are "just" migrant workers, in Singapore. It would be an exhaustive laundry list to include all such organizations in this article's short space. Nevertheless, the noble intent of these organizations is common: to empower the disempowered in the community regardless of religion, nationality, or class. The birth of "by-migrants-for-migrants" organizations like Indo Family and other similar support networks is a testimony to this empowerment. With such heartening developments in the community service scene, the migrant workers in Singapore could perhaps, one day, really find their welcome here.