

# Public Outreach for Migrant Workers' Rights in Singapore

## Transient Workers Count Too

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**A**S THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SPREAD, Singapore's government reacted with a strong sense of urgency, introducing measures that quickly isolated and treated citizens and Permanent Residents who fell ill and checked infection rates. All seemed to be going well, until the virus swept like wildfire through dormitories housing male migrant workers. For all its systematic efforts to protect Singaporeans from the worst effects of the pandemic, the fact is that the government had given little or no thought to the migrant workers who numbered nearly a million men and women and made up one in three of the island state's workforce. What had looked like a highly successful response to COVID-19 was suddenly found wanting.

This experience is illustrative of a long-term problem with Singapore's attitude towards the migrant workers it employs. Their labor has come to be vital to the country's economy and this much is acknowledged, but they are often treated as though they are invisible, except on occasions when they are seen as causing problems or suffer accidents or abusive behavior that momentarily commands attention.

## Transient Workers Count Too

Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) is a Singaporean non-governmental organization (NGO) that promotes the rights and wellbeing of these workers.

Part of the work of TWC2 consists of trying to change the mindset that often enables abusive and unjust treatment of migrant workers to occur, even when that violates Singapore's laws and the standards that are commonly taken to apply to Singaporean nationals.

TWC2 originated in 2003 in what was intended to be a one-year initiative to promote improved conditions for domestic workers. This followed the death of Indonesian domestic worker, Muawanatul Chasanah, through beating and starvation at the hands of her employers. The Working Committee Two (there had been a previous "Working Committee" of civil society groups - hence the name) hoped to influence the public in favor of

better treatment of domestic workers and to promote changes in the law and regulations concerning their employment. It achieved some media coverage, enhanced by the publication of letters to the press from members, gave talks at a few educational institutions and distributed leaflets on several occasions.

One initiative was a children's essay competition, which secured cooperation from the Ministry of Education. Children were invited to choose from a small range of topics, including "Why I like/hate my maid" and "My maid, my friend", which it was hoped would encourage the children to think more about their relationship with the foreign women then employed in one in seven Singapore households.

Proposals were made concerning better legal protections for domestic workers, including that they should have a weekly day off and be covered by Singapore's Employment Act, which would have established a legal limit to their working hours. A dialogue was opened with the key government body handling migrant worker matters, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM).

Nevertheless, despite some evidence of an impact on public opinion, this initial effort was drawing to a close at the end of 2003 and some members thought that a more sustained initiative should be launched. They resolved to establish a legally-constituted society which would function until it was no longer needed. This was the origin of Transient Workers Count Too, whose name preserves in its initials those of its predecessor. TWC2 was formally registered as a society in 2004.

One key difference with its forerunner was that the new TWC2 expanded its scope to work for the rights and wellbeing of all low-paid migrant workers, male as well as female. This followed the recognition by the founding group that many male workers also faced abuses, such as non-payment of salaries, arbitrary dismissal, unhygienic and crowded accommodation, as well as prejudiced attitudes, but received less public sympathy than female workers, due in large part to the presumption that women need protecting but men should be tough enough to cope with any problems they might face.

In practice, TWC2's work with male workers was slow to take off, but a radical change came through the establishment of The Cuff Road Project (TCRP) in 2008. This program was started in Singapore's Little India district to provide food for destitute workers, most of whom were awaiting the settlement of claims against employers. It provides meals six days a week for destitute workers (breakfast and dinner on weekdays, lunch on Saturdays:

alternatives are available on Sundays), and assists workers who need help in pursuing claims, mostly relating to salary or medical problems.



TWC2 volunteers registering and speaking with workers at TWC2 food program.



TWC2 volunteers working with migrant workers.

### Advocacy for Rights of Foreign Workers

Foreign employees in Singapore are distinguished according to their skills and salary levels. The great majority of the workers with whom TWC2 is concerned are defined as work permit holders, who not only are paid the least, but are attached to specific employers, who are at liberty to fire and repatriate them without giving any reason for doing so. This gives them considerable power over the workers, who fear that if they object to how they

are treated or complain if, for example, they are not paid the salary that they were promised, they will lose their employment and might be returned to their home country. New male workers, in particular, could be worse off than ever, having paid considerable recruitment fees equivalent to a year to eighteen months of their salaries to middlemen to obtain a job.

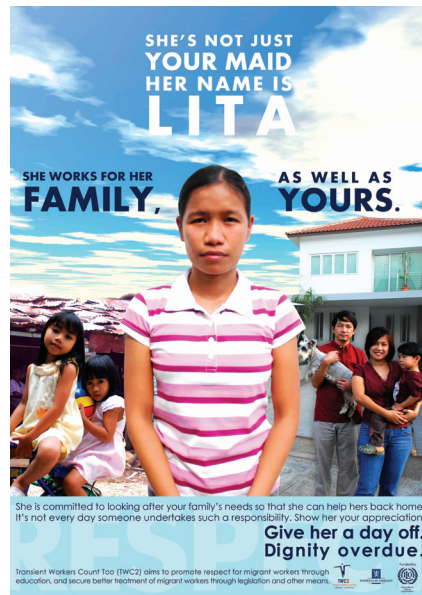
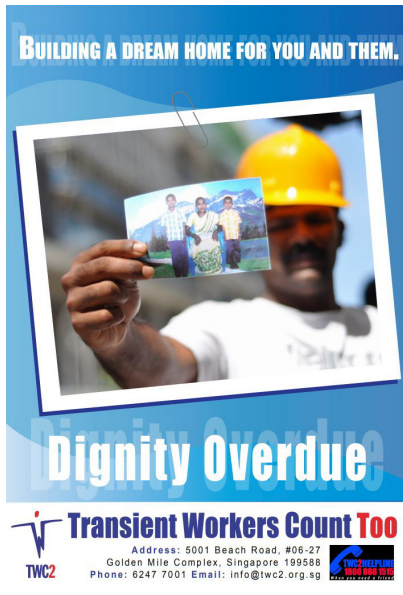
### **Awareness-raising Activities**

TWC2 set out to achieve its goals through advocacy (including public engagement), research and direct services. It would have been easier to find volunteers and raise money simply by focusing on direct services, since providing humanitarian assistance to individual workers who were abused, injured or unpaid would have made for a more comfortable relationship with the authorities and also had a readier appeal to the significant segment of the public that is wary of any initiative that it regards as contesting government policy or prevailing societal norms. We did not take that route, but insisted on the centrality of advocacy to our work. We argued that rather than endlessly seeking to repair damage that was already done, we should aim to bring about the changes in official policies and practices and in public attitudes that would prevent the problems that surfaced every day from arising.

From this perspective, providing direct services was therefore not only of value to individual workers, but was a means by which TWC2 could better understand the whole range of problems faced by workers and, with the help of research, formulate realistic and practical proposals for reform.

This was important when it came to undertaking outreach work to the public, whatever form that took. It mattered that we were speaking from a position of engagement with migrant workers, and could cite real examples of workers' experiences; it also mattered that we were not simply pointing out what we thought was wrong, but had definite practical proposals for reform: both at an official and a public level, we would be taken more seriously for making constructive criticisms of official policies and practice.

The media through which we have communicated have changed somewhat since TWC2's foundation. In our early days, we produced a fair amount of printed material, such as leaflets and background papers. Though we soon established a website, it was quite basic, offering information about TWC2, statements released by the society and various short articles setting out our views on specific issues or offering focused factual information.

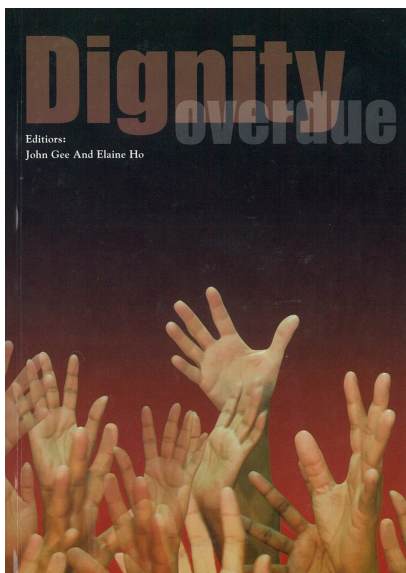


### Advocacy posters (2009)

In October 2011, a redesigned website was launched. It was planned as a much more dynamic site than its predecessor, with a steady flow of new articles on it, mostly drawing on workers' own experiences as related to our interviewees, with an emphasis on content that supported key advocacy objectives. Articles typically draw an initial readership in the hundreds, but some have gained considerably more, particularly when they cover something that is seen as controversial or as a burning issue of the moment: to give a recent example, as COVID-19 spread among male migrant workers in Singapore in 2020, an article challenging received wisdom, "The dorms are not the problem", attracted so many views in the twenty-four hours after its publication that the website was significantly slowed down and it came close to crashing.

However, cause-related websites universally tend to mainly attract readers who are already broadly sympathetic to them, and TWC2 recognized the importance of continuing to do outreach work beyond this constituency, to reach people who might not be hostile, but might take little interest in migrant worker matters and not know a lot about them. This includes, as from the start, providing journalists with information for articles, writing letters to the print media and providing spokespeople to the media as a whole,

usually on matters currently in the news, but sometimes, we have tried to stimulate media interest, such as through the release of research findings.



*Dignity Overdue* (2006)

## Public Engagement

Some of our public engagement work is necessarily reactive. In normal times, we are often invited to provide speakers for educational institutions and other bodies, and they normally determine the topic of a talk. Most requests come from schools and junior colleges. Speakers generally need to have a fair amount of experience working with migrant workers, not only so that they can provide good informative and factual talks and answer any questions that are raised, but also for their own self-confidence. Even for a relatively experienced volunteer, standing up

and speaking can be daunting. We have a Public Engagement Team which is notified of speaker requests, and it is normally up to them to sort out who responds: a volunteer simply emails other members to say, “I’ll do this” and it gets covered.

Quite a few school and junior college students undertake projects on migrant workers and ask for our assistance. Some may not take much interest in the subject: it can feel as though we are doing work for them that is not appreciated, and will be forgotten as soon as their project is completed. Nevertheless, there are some who ask questions that reflect a fair amount of thought and concern with their subject. Most responses to student information requests are handled by the Public Engagement Team. They work on the basis that it is worthwhile to do whatever we can to have a positive impact on their views towards migrant workers, which will have long term consequences for public attitudes. Perhaps, among the many with whom we are in touch, we would reach a few who may make a stronger commitment

to migrant worker rights in years to come. We have, in fact, had volunteers come to us who mention having contacted us years before for information.



Walking tour through Little India



Singaporean students

### Outreach Sessions

Much of our work is handled by volunteers. Since 2016, we have held monthly “Heartbeat” gatherings for those who express an interest in volunteering, where they are introduced to our activities and informed of our current volunteer needs, which ask for various levels of commitment and prior experience. Besides work such as writing for the website, and helping with research or the Public Engagement Team, this includes running TCRP and conducting monthly outreach leafletting to migrant workers to publi-



(This page and opposite page) Outreach activities





cize TWC2's services. For each outreach session, a migrant worker nationality and their usual gathering places is targeted, with outreach leaflets in the relevant language – Bangla for Bangladeshi workers in part of Little India, Tamil and other languages spoken in India for Indian workers gathering in other Little India locations, for example. Sometimes these sessions might incorporate a short survey of workers: questions are kept short and few and answers are logged on mobile phones.

Ever since Singapore had the first COVID lockdown on 7 April 2020, the male migrant worker population has not had the freedom to roam the

community. They are only allowed to exit for work, or to visit the nearest “Recreation Centre” (RC) once a week.<sup>1</sup>

TWC2 has been holding events at the RCs to engage with the workers there. These are usually small scale events, but TWC2 organized one large “funfair” in February 2021 that attracted a good number of workers.

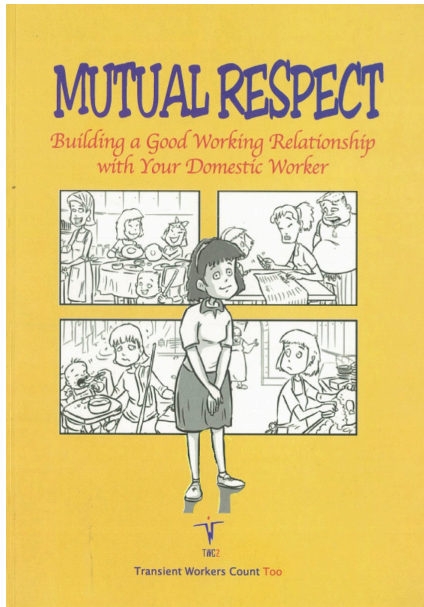
Most of the TWC2’s volunteers are young people who join us on a short or medium term basis. Some tell us that this was their first ever contact with migrant workers and few have interacted with migrant workers before. They can learn a lot in a short time about migrant workers’ lives and they will take that knowledge away with them to family, friends and community. It might be thought that the number of such people would be small, but it probably comes to between one hundred and one hundred fifty new volunteers each year.

### **Weekly Day Off Campaign**

The longest-running TWC2 campaign has been for a weekly day off for all domestic workers.

Fundamental to our stand on a weekly day off is the view that all human beings are entitled to certain basic rights, and among them is a right to have time for rest and recreation, including a day every week when they do not work. If that is what we wish for ourselves, we are ethically bound to accord it to others. However, we recognized that there was a range of arguments advanced by many employers in justification of not giving their domestic workers days off (She might get into bad company, she might run away, I need her there to look after my children/elderly parent...), and we had to respond to those, which we did very thoroughly, so that there is no anti-day off argument to which we do not have a sound answer. We might not convince many of those employers, but we needed to make a good case in the eyes of members of the public who do not employ domestic workers and might not hold strong views one way or the other about the day off question. To the extent that we could convince a growing sector of the public that all domestic workers should have a weekly day off as of right, the better placed we would be to secure that right by law.

The campaign involved year on year initiatives. In 2005, for example, we published *Mutual Respect*, a guide for people considering or already employing a domestic worker, which, among much else, contested ten myths



about domestic workers, four of which directly or indirectly concerned days off. The following year, we hosted a visit by an Indonesian speaker who talked about the issue to several audiences and we held a sports event for International Migrants Day through which it was publicized. We provided support for the making of a film on the theme of a day off. In 2007, most of our day off work was low-key, but included distribution of a pro-day off leaflet in Orchard Road, Singapore's top shopping area: this



## 2 Myths and Facts

There are 140,000 foreign domestic workers here, which means one in seven households employs one. A large majority of these workers are from Indonesia and the Philippines. Nearly all the rest come from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, India and Bangladesh. Most employers and domestic workers get along quite well, but certain myths don't help get these relationships off to a good start.

**MYTH #1**  
If the agency is registered, it must be OK.

**Fact:** Registration is not the same as accreditation. Accreditation is important because it ensures that businesses such as employment agencies adhere to ethical business practices and render professional services.

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has made it compulsory for all employment agencies handling foreign domestic workers to be accredited. Currently, MOM recognizes two accreditation schemes. These schemes are offered by CaseTrust and the Association of Employment Agencies Association (AEAS). Look out for the stickers of these bodies at the front office of employment agencies. You can also check if employment agencies are really accredited by surfing through websites of these organizations. Central regulating bodies such as CaseTrust and AEAS could check on

was done jointly with another NGO, the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME).

In 2008, TWC2 joined with HOME and UNIFEM-Singapore in the most ambitious public engagement Day Off initiative yet. A press launch generated seven print media articles, as well as broadcast reports. A Day Off website was established, managed by UNIFEM-Singapore, to which over two thousand people signed up in support. Five thousand leaflets aimed at employers and three thousand postcards were distributed and we continued to campaign through our existing channels.



**DOMESTIC WORKERS  
NEED THEIR  
DAYS OFF TOO**

Upon the launch of this campaign, the chief government body dealing with migrant worker employment issued a press release that opened:

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) is committed to ensuring that the interests and welfare of all foreign workers, including foreign domestic workers (FDWs), are safeguarded while working in Singapore. In this regard, the “Day Off Campaign” to raise awareness among employers on the importance of a rest day for their FDWs is in line with MOM’s effort to ensure that FDWs are accorded adequate rest.

Later that year, *The Sunday Times* invited readers’ responses to the question, “Should maids get a mandatory day off?” Two hundred thirty readers responded: 81 percent said ‘Yes’, 19 percent said ‘No’ (*Sunday Times*, 13 July 2008)

The MOM statement and media coverage were testimony to the progress made in raising support for a weekly day off for all domestic workers.

A multiple year campaign is challenging. The pro-Day Off arguments had been made: there was little new to add and it was hard to come up with attention-winning, thought-provoking ways to raise more public interest.

One initiative that we were able to build upon was the publication in June 2011 of “Made to Work: Attitudes Towards Granting Regular Days Off to Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore.” A joint report by UNIFEM-Singapore, HOME and TWC2, the 70-page report was based on survey responses from five hundred eighty two households. It found that only 12 percent of the domestic workers surveyed had a weekly day off, and that 70 percent of Singaporeans who did not employ domestic workers themselves were in favor of them having a weekly day off. It recommended making a weekly day off mandatory.

At last, a mandatory day off was introduced, to come into force on 1 January 2013, but the impact of the new policy was muted by “escape clauses” for employers averse to giving days off; one made it inapplicable to existing contracts (which might have a duration of up to two years) and the other, which continues to severely limit access to days off up to the present time, allows days off to be relinquished in return for payment through the agreement of the employers and workers. This takes no account of the power imbalance between employers and workers, particularly young women who may be working away from home for the first time, indebted through recruitment expenses and face the threat of being repatriated, unemployed, if they refuse “no day off” terms.

Though no definite figures exist, a fair calculation would be that, between 2003, when we started to campaign for a weekly day off, and 2020, before the COVID-19 outbreak, the proportion of domestic workers having no days off at all fell from around 60 percent or more to between 35 and 40 percent. On 22 July 2021, Singapore’s Ministry of Manpower announced



TWC2 staff and volunteers organized in 2014 the International Domestic Workers Day (June 16th) event that was attended by Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers. (Photo by Davy Animas)

that from the end of 2022, domestic workers must be given at least one day off a month.<sup>2</sup>

A contrasting campaign, centered on male workers, has been focused on measures to better ensure that they are paid what they are supposed to be paid according to what was stated when they were recruited. This has been sustained for nearly ten years.

We called for three measures to be introduced and implemented:

- a. Workers to receive a statement of what pay they should receive, in a language that they understand, at the time of their recruitment;
- b. All low-paid workers to receive itemized pay slips when they are paid, setting out basic pay, overtime pay and hours worked; and
- c. Salaries to be paid into bank accounts in workers' own names.

None of these measures seem far-reaching in themselves, but together, they would help to counter some of the devious ways in which unscrupulous employers cheat workers of the money that they are due for their work.

The case for these reforms was argued, as usual, in talks and through contact with the mass media, but largely through our website, which has run article after article based on interviews with migrant workers who have experienced problems obtaining the salary payments they were due. Interspersed among these articles occasionally were others that argued the issues and stated our proposals for reform.

Over the past six years, regulations have been introduced that go a long way towards introducing the changes we called for: workers are supposed to be given a copy of the In Principle Approval document issued when they are recruited, and this states their agreed salary. Employers are obliged to provide itemized pay slips. The introduction of payment of salaries into bank accounts was speeded up by the COVID-19 outbreak, when the anti-viral advantages of contactless payment became very apparent.

Despite this progress, public outreach around these basic pay questions is still necessary, not least because of inadequate enforcement. For example, workers recruited on the basis of being paid a certain amount can still be faced with demands that they sign a contract that gives them substantially less once they arrive in Singapore, but until 2018, the Ministry of Manpower treated this as a valid voluntary agreement that superseded the existing



agreed terms, despite the obviously disadvantaged position of any newly arrived, indebted worker faced with a “sign or go home” demand.

### **Advocacy Through Film – “I DREAM OF SINGAPORE”**

In 2018, local filmmaker Lei Yuan Bin documented the activities of TWC2 for an entire year. He filmed TWC2 staff, volunteers and residents who stayed at the male shelter. The filmmaker eventually focused on one worker who was injured at work and was on his way home after going through the entire recovery process. He documented his post-injury life, his interactions with those at TWC2 who helped him, and his return to Bangladesh after a long recovery from serious internal injuries.

The resulting film was titled “I DREAM OF SINGAPORE (IDOS)” and debuted at the Singapore International Film Festival in November 2019. It then made it to the prestigious Berlinale in February 2020.

### **Future Plans**

Our plans for the future are being made in the shadow of the COVID-19 outbreak, which had consequences whose full impact remains to be assessed. Most male workers were physically isolated from contact with other people during the outbreak and their freedom of movement remains restricted as of the beginning of 2022. Domestic workers also faced movement restrictions. We communicated with many workers by mobile phone, but still feel that something is lost from reduced face-to-face contact. Activities such as our monthly outreach sessions to workers and talks at schools, universities and other institutions, largely came to a halt, though we continued to meet online information requests through emails, phone calls and even met a few students and researchers through videocalls.

Overall, online activity assumed a much greater importance than previously and, while we look forward to the resumption of the kind of public engagement we had in the past, we anticipate that online communication will continue to have an enhanced role.

The website was redesigned shortly before the COVID-19 outbreak to be more user-friendly for people who wish to access it using mobile phones. It attracted increased interest during the pandemic and the facts and figures it has provided have been increasingly cited in other media outlets.



A new staff member was taken on in January 2021 tasked with rejuvenating our Facebook page, with a target of posting new material every three or four days.

In June 2021, in cooperation with Migrant Forum in Asia, we held a webinar titled “Hunger Games for real: The Bangla worker abroad” and “TWC2 Tamil Facebook Live”, aimed at Tamil-speaking workers. While neither was directed to the Singapore public, they employed communication technology and gave us experience that we expect to be able to use in public engagement work.

Since TWC2 was founded, we have pursued our goals through advocacy, research, public engagement and direct services. We considered these fields of work to be complementary and always treated them as such. We never expected quick results and understood that commitment to year-on-year activity was essential to bring about change. We cannot say that any aim has been achieved in full, but progress has been made on better securing workers’ pay, days off for domestic workers, and improving accommodation, transport and safety standards. Public engagement to broaden popular awareness of migrant workers and their rights and encourage support has played a role in bringing about such changes as have occurred, and we think that it has been laying a good foundation for further advances in years to come.

## Endnotes

1 The recreation centres are usually close to worker dormitories and far from residential areas. They are heavily guarded and workers are checked upon entry. They offer a few small shops for workers to buy necessities, but no opportunity to mix with the local community or access public commercial areas.

2 The Ministry of Manpower recently announced the following measure:

d. Implementing mandatory rest day for MDWs. Employers will be required to provide their MDWs with at least one rest day a month that cannot be compensated away. This will provide more opportunities for MDWs to form a network of support outside the household, as well as rest and recharge from work. We understand that some employers may need time to adjust to the new rest day arrangements. Hence, the mandatory rest day policy will take effect in end-2022.

“New Measures to Strengthen Support For Migrant Domestic Workers”, Ministry of Manpower, 22 July 2021, [www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/press-releases/2021/0722-better-support-for-mdws](http://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/press-releases/2021/0722-better-support-for-mdws)

