

**T**O MARK Foreign Domestic Workers Day, ACMI wanted to learn more about the living conditions and needs of foreign maids in Singapore.

It surveyed 299 FDWs attending courses at the ACMI Training Centre in November. From the 231 valid results, these were the top line results:

- 91 per cent are aged 20 to 40.
- The majority are Indonesian (40 per cent) and Filipino (39 per cent) and 15 per cent were from Myanmar.
- 64 per cent are single.
- 80 per cent have worked in Singapore only.
- 84 per cent earn between \$300 and \$500 a month.
- 34 per cent have a day off once a week, 46 per cent have a day off twice a month, 13 per cent once a month and 6 per cent have no day off.
- They work an average of 12.3 hours a day.
- 93 per cent have three meals a day.
- 93 per cent sleep seven to eight hours a day.
- 85 per cent have their own room.
- 84 per cent can rest if they are sick.
- 97 per cent of employers pay for the maids' medical fees.

Try putting yourself in the shoes of these women. Can you imagine working 12-hour shifts, without enough food to eat, for only a few hundred dollars per month and no days off?

Do you think you could share your room with a total stranger and sleep less than seven hours a day?

What if you had to work while sick? Few Singaporeans in their right minds would accept such working conditions yet there are thousands of FDWs working here who do.

## As a Catholic employer how do you treat your maid?

Do you practise what Jesus preaches in *Luke 6:31*: "Do to others as you would have them do to you"?

Human beings should never be treated only as machines to complete a job or task.

Instead, the well-being of each person should be our ultimate goal. Every human being has equal dignity with one another and no person is of greater or less importance than others.

Work in any form has an intrinsic dignity as well because it comes from the hands of humans who are special in the eyes of God.

God has given us a role in co-creating the world and making it a better place. So whatever the work we do, whether cleaning a house or cleansing a soul, we can take pride in it as it promotes human development.

# Can you imagine working 12 hours a day, with no day off?



Try putting yourself in the shoes of these women. Do you think you could share your room with a stranger, sleep less than seven hours a day, or work while sick? As Catholic employers, we can make a difference.

*Foreign Domestic Workers Day was celebrated on Dec 4 to pay tribute to more than 200,000 women for their contributions to our society. Organised by the Foreign Domestic Worker Association for Skills Training (FAST) and non-governmental organisations like the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Itinerant People (ACMI), the event was held at the Singapore Polytechnic and saw several thousand maids and their employers celebrating together. In this article, ACMI gives Catholic employers of maids some food for thought.*

The dignity of work also implies the need to ensure that all people have working conditions worthy of the children of God.

Good working conditions are of course subjective so we decided to find out what would be important to maids in Singapore. The maids who took part in the ACMI survey were given a list and asked to tick the three issues most important to them. This is how they ranked the items on the list:

1. Be allowed to attend training classes.
2. Be free to contact my family and friends.
3. Have enough sleep daily.
4. Have proper meals daily.
5. Have time for prayer.
6. Have my own mobile phone.
7. Have a weekly day off.
8. Higher salary.
9. Access to the Internet after work.
10. Be allowed to keep my passport and bank passbook.

## Now think about yourself as a job-seeker. What is most important to you when you are looking for a job?

Most people would say more pay, a good bonus package, and benefits that include annual leave or overtime allowances. Some seek out employers who promote a work-life balance, while others hope for friendly bosses and colleagues. Finally, you would check out the advancement prospects.

Compare your priorities with what matters most to FDWs in Singapore.

Higher salary is ranked near the bottom of their list. There are no laws that entitle FDWs to bonuses, annual leave, overtime pay or time off.

Most cannot choose who they work for, and are likely to end up with people of a completely alien culture and religion than their own. Some maids cannot even communicate properly with their employers.

And maids have no prospects of promotion, even though they may be keen to better themselves through skills training.

Most of the items on the list are so basic that most of us take them for granted in our own jobs.

## How can we as Catholic employers of maids address these issues?

We can take into account the two core principles of the Church's social teachings, emphasising the dignity of the human person and the dignity of work.

Based on this and ACMI's experience, there are five areas we can work on to help achieve dignity for the foreign maids in our homes:

1. **Communication and Respect:** Respect begets respect, and communication is often the first step towards establishing this. We need to respect differing cultures, work, ethics, religions and values.
2. **Meals and Accommodation:** Having sufficient food and adequate accommodation are a basic part of decent working conditions. As employers we must ensure that these basic needs are met.
3. **Rest:** All workers need their daily rest as well as regular days off. We should not expect our FDWs to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Having adequate rest can help enhance their work and mental well-being.
4. **Compensation:** Getting paid fairly and on time is an expectation of every worker. It is the basic duty of all employers to ensure this is done.
5. **Growth and Development:** As employers, we can help to motivate our FDWs by supporting their efforts to learn and improve their skills. This will encourage them to do their jobs well and strive to progress.



Like all of us who work, maids need time out from their jobs to meet their friends, socialise and get a break from the routine of cleaning, cooking, washing and ironing.