BiyInvitation

Foreign domestic workers: A suggested rule book

An affluent society like Singapore can afford to treat its vulnerable workers, such as foreign domestic workers, better

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For The Straits Times

There are approximately 250,000 foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore. My wife and I used to employ domestic helpers in Singapore, New York and Washington. In our relationship with our domestic helpers, we tried to uphold the following rules which I offer for Singaporeans to consider.

RULE 1: TREATHER AS A FELLOW PERSON

The most important rule is to treat your domestic helper as a fellow human being. She does not belong to some inferior sub-species of the human family. She is also not your slave. She is entitled to respect for her human dignity. Poverty has caused your domestic helper to leave her family to come and work for you. She has made a huge self-sacrifice in order to send money home to her family. Show some understanding and appreciation.

The FDWs have enabled our women to pursue their careers. They cook for us and keep our homes clean and tidy. They look after our children and grandchildren, our aged disabled parents or grandparents. The comfortable life we enjoy in Singapore is due, in no small part, to the FDWs.

RULE 2: TREAT HER AS A FAMILY MEMBER

The second rule is to treat your domestic helper as a member of your family. When we went out to eat, in New York or Washington, we would invite our domestic helper to join us. When we went on an excursion, we would take our domestic helper along. For example, we took them to see shows on Broadway. When we had novitiates, we would eat our dinner in the kitchen and ask our domestic helper to join us.

Since our domestic helper is a member of our family, she should be entitled to follow us, wherever we go. No hotel, restaurant or club should bar the entry of our domestic helper. In this respect, the Tanglin Club, the American Club and the Cricket Club should emulate the good example of the Singapore Island Country Club.

RULE 3: A ROOM OF HER OWN

My third rule is to provide your domestic helper with a room of her own. We all need privacy. The domestic helper is no exception. After a day’s hard work, she needs to have a private space she can retire to, to rest, to listen to music, to watch TV and to talk with other family back home. I remember visiting the home of a wealthy friend. He showed me around his spacious new house. At the end of the tour, I asked him and his wife where their domestic helper’s room was.

She replied that the helper slept either on the couch in the living room or on the floor in the kitchen. I was tempted to ask why they didn’t let her stay in one of the empty rooms I saw but my wife stopped me.

EMPLOYERS WITH SUFFICIENT ROOMS

Employers with sufficient rooms in their homes who do not provide adequate accommodation have a bad attitude towards their helper. Many Singaporeans live in apartments and may lack the space to give the domestic helper a room of her own. In such cases, she should be given sufficient space and privacy in a bedroom shared with family members.

I am also unhappy with the size of the so-called maid’s room in some of our new buildings. They are smaller than an average cell. I appeal to the building authorities to consider prescribing a more generous space for the maid’s room. It is insufficient and unkind to build such tiny spaces for our domestic helpers.

RULE 4: FEED HER WELL

My fourth rule is to provide your domestic helper with adequate and nutritious food.

I have observed that our domestic helper would eat the same food as ourselves. If we had leftovers for dinner, we would buy one for our helper. We did not ask our helper to eat separate and inferior food.

I said to some employers do not allow their helpers to eat the same food but to eat a different and inferior food. As a result, some of the domestic helpers in Singapore have complained to the two non-governmental organisations, Transient Workers Count Too (TWCT) and the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), about inadequate or poor-quality food.

In fact, concerns about food and nutrition are among the top five issues raised by FWAs. Many domestic helpers are concerned about whether they will have enough to eat when employers go on vacation, leaving them at home. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has even had to send reminders to employers to make arrangements for the FDW to have food.

NOM even has to spell out a requirement that employers must provide FWAs with at least three meals a day, enough for a female engaged in moderate activity. This includes four slices of bread with spreads for breakfast and rice, cooked vegetables, a palm-sized amount of meat, and fruit for lunch and dinner.

Media reports periodically crop up of employers who starve their maid. A 2017 case involved a couple who starved their maid for more than a year and caused her weight to drop from 49kg to 29 kg. Such behaviour by employers who starve their maids is shameful, especially in an affluent society like Singapore.

RULE 5: NEVER BE VIOLENT

My fifth rule is that, under no circumstances can an employer behave violently towards his/her helper. It is shocking to read about horror stories in the media about employers physically abusing their employees.

I wonder how a civilised country like Singapore produces such human monsters. It is a sad truth that we have companions who are sadists and psychopaths, or who are mentally so disturbed they treat their maids like innocent and vulnerable people.

I trust MOM would require every potential employer of an FDW to go for a psychological test. It would help to disqualify the psychopaths and sadists from the right to employ domestic helpers.

I am glad that our policies and our courts take a serious view of such physical abuse. Under our Penal Code, a judge could increase the punishment for an offender of a domestic helper by 1½ times. The court could also bar such offenders from employing domestic helpers.

RULE 6: NO VERNAL ABUSE

My sixth rule is that the domestic helper is entitled to adequate rest. Since 2003, the law requires employers to give their domestic helpers a weekly day of rest.

According to Ms Madeline Poh, writing in the Singapore Law Review, employers have followed the law. In addition to a weekly day of rest, a good employer should also give his employee some rest time every day.

My wife and I give our domestic helpers two hours to rest every afternoon. Employers should remember that their domestic helpers are human beings and not robots or machines. When my wife and I are on leave, we would allow our domestic helper to go to her room to rest at 10pm.

Conclusion

In Singapore, foreign domestic workers are protected by the Penal Code and the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act. They are not protected by the Employment Act, unlike Hong Kong, which covers them under the Employment Ordinance.

In 2011, the International Labour Organisation, of which Singapore is a member, adopted the Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, President Hallimah Yacob, when she was a trade unionist, played a major role in the adoption of the convention. The convention came into force in 2013 and has 29 states parties.

The convention requires a state party to guarantee domestic workers the same rights as other workers, regarding daily and weekly rest periods, overtime compensation, paid annual leave and adequate protection against violence.

I hope that, by the time Singapore becomes a party to this convention, all foreign domestic workers will have adequate protection.

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