

Can You Imagine Working 12 Hours A Day, With No Day Off?

Singapore's second Foreign Domestic Worker's (FDW) Day was celebrated on the 4th of December 2011, to pay tribute to the over 200,000 FDWs for their contributions to our society. Organised by the Foreign Domestic Worker Association for Skills Training (FAST) and NGOs like the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Itinerant People (ACMI), the event was held at Singapore Polytechnic and saw several thousand FDWs and their employers coming together to celebrate their special day. In conjunction with this annual event ACMI wanted to find out more about the living conditions and needs of FDWs in Singapore and decided to do a survey of its Training Centre students.

During ACMI's Training Centre registrations in November we managed to poll 299 students out of which 231 were valid results. The following top line survey findings were garnered:

- 91% were of the age between 20 and 40 years old.
- The majority are Filipino (39%) and Indonesian (40%) with an increasing number of Myanmar (15%).
- 64% are single.
- 80% have worked in Singapore only.
- 84% earn between S\$300 and S\$500 per month.
- 34% have a day off once a week, 46% have a day off twice a month, 13% once a month and 6% had no day off at all.
- The average working hours were 12.3 hours per day.
- Concerning their living conditions:
 - 93% had 3 meals a day
 - 93% slept 7 to 8 hours a day
 - 85% have their own room to sleep in
 - 84% could rest if they were sick
 - 97% of their employers paid for their medical fees

These statistics might not mean anything to you but try putting yourselves in their shoes. Can you imagine working 12-hour plus work shifts, without enough food to eat, earning only a few hundred dollars per month and having no days off at all? 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 you were sick and on top of that pay for your medical fees with your measly pay? I do not think any Singaporean 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 FDW? Do you practise what Jesus preaches in Luke 6:31: "Do to others as you would have them do to you"?

God created man in his own image and is loved by him infinitely. Christ is united with every human being through the incarnation which means each one of us has a special significance or dignity. To God everyone is of infinite worth, indefinitely important and can never be replaced. This principle implies that 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. Hence whatever the work we do be it cleansing a house or cleansing a soul, we can take pride in it as it promotes human development. 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 FDWs working in Singapore.

In the last question of the survey we asked the FDWs to tick the 3 most important issues to them and the following are ranked in order of importance:

1. Be allowed to attend training classes
2. Be free to contact your family and friends
3. Have enough sleep daily
4. Have proper meal daily
5. Have time for prayer
6. Have your own handphone
7. Have weekly day off
8. Get higher salary
9. Have access to internet after work
10. Be allowed to retain your passport and bank passbook

Now consider your most important issues when you are looking for a job. Like most Singaporeans, you would want a higher salary with a good bonus and benefits package like more annual leave or overtime allowances. Also an employer with a compatible company culture that promotes good work life balance coupled with a friendly boss and colleagues would be good. Finally you would see if there were any advancement opportunities in the company. Now compare this with the list above to see if it matches.

As you can see only one item, higher salary, matches but that is ranked near the bottom in importance. By law a FDW is not entitled to any bonus, annual leave, overtime pay or any time off at all let alone a weekly day off. They usually cannot choose their employer who often has a completely alien culture and religion to which they have been used to for most of their lives. In fact there are some FDWs who cannot even communicate properly with their employers. Finally there is no hope of getting a promotion though they are keen to better themselves by attending skills training. The top seven issues that FDWs are most concerned with are the most basic which we take for granted on our job every day.

How can we as Catholic employers of FDWs address these issues? We can by taking into account the two core principles of the Church's social doctrine which are the dignity of the human person and the dignity of work. Based on this and ACMI's experience there are five pillars to help achieve dignity for FDWs:



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.
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.

We hope the points above have provided some food for thought and some practical guidelines on how Catholic employers can better interact and relate to their FDWs. "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." Matthew 25:40.