

PRESS RELEASE

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The suicide of an Indonesian domestic worker in Singapore is reflective of the tremendous pressure young women from poor villages in South East Asia face when they decide to work overseas away from their families, neighbours and friends. Their village lifestyle is in total contrast to the fast paced, competitive, urban society in Singapore.

HOME's social workers have seen more than one case of attempted suicide by domestic workers. We appeal to all stakeholders to address the conditions of women who are vulnerable to pressures beyond their control. There are multiple factors that often lead to suicide and the apparent cause of suicide may just be the trigger to the act. Sulastri Wardyoyo, aged 26 (or possibly much younger), took her life after failing the entry test and faced with an S\$1000 or 10 million rupiah deportation cost back to Indonesia. Additionally, there were possibly threats and reprisals from her trainer and agent. Many domestic workers have been traumatised by the punitive treatment meted out by staff of agencies. They complain of being insulted and humiliated in varied ways. Some take great risks trying to escape an intolerable situation. HOME knows of an Indonesian domestic worker who fell to her death from the window of a housing block flat at Farrer Road where the agency kept her and other women.

Hong Kong, Taiwan and other countries do not have similar entry tests. Why then should Singapore make such 'pen and paper tests' compulsory for domestic workers? Domestic work is skills-based and therefore should be rated on skills not verbal ability. Language proficiency comes with practice, not passing multiple choice assessment tests. Some Indonesian domestic workers who have passed these tests report that they simply made lucky guesses. Unfortunately for Sulastri, she was not good at guessing and, tragically, saw taking her own life as the only way out.

Domestic workers who fail entry tests should be given temporary work permits conditional on passing another assessment. Failing a test which is hardly the perfect criteria for domestic employment anyway should not have such a devastating impact on the worker. It is too costly for a worker to be repatriated after failing a test and as a result, some agencies send those who fail to Malaysia or Batam where they are vulnerable to being trafficked for sexual exploitation. HOME has recently been alerted that an agency in Singapore is selling Myanmar women who failed their tests to the flesh trade in Kuala Lumpur.

The debt bondage system is the greater evil that hung Sulastri in this tragic event. Foreign workers who are struggling to survive should not be further burdened by the cost of getting work. Leaving market practices to the supply and demand of labour is saying 'yes' to the 'flesh trade' in our globalised economy.

We recommend that the State should:

- Enforce a cap on agency costs from origin to destination of not more than one month's wages to be borne by the worker. Though the revised Employment Agencies Act provides a

cap on agency fees chargeable to the worker in Singapore – the worker continues to be saddled with the prohibitive costs incurred in her country of origin.

- Revamp the entry tests to make it skills based and relevant or consider abolishing such tests after all other host countries do not have such tests.
- Work with countries of origin to arrange for skills based entry tests, where necessary, to be conducted at approved overseas centres.
- Issue temporary work permits to Domestic Workers who fail the entry tests, conditional on passing a reassessment.

Sulastri was so burdened by the debt looming because she was voiceless and powerless. Let her death be the awakening of a social conscience on what is the right thing to do to protect precious human life whenever and wherever so that we would not see a repeat of this kind of tragedy.

“What should move us to action is human dignity: the inalienable dignity of the oppressed, but also the dignity of each of us. We lose dignity if we tolerate the intolerable.”

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