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Better ways to tackle underage maids

WE HAVE housed about 20 underage maids. Of these, two attempted suicide, one was convicted of theft, one will be on trial for child abuse, one was persuaded by her employer to have an abortion, and the others were victims of some form of abuse and exploitation.

Domestic work in Singapore is extremely demanding for a village teenager. We are glad the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has made it clear it will not condone underage workers and placed the onus on employment agencies to prevent such occurrences.

But raising the entry age from 18 to 23 years has led to a shortage of maids and therefore new ways by agencies to beat the rule.

The authorities in Singapore and the maids' home countries need to work together with greater tenacity to deter this practice.

We are also concerned over why MOM continues to rely on the official passport as proof of age when it is well known that passports from some countries can be doctored.

Furthermore, MOM has penalised only four of the 14 agencies that brought in underage maids last year. This is not in line with encouraging agencies to guard against recruiting underage workers.

The difficulty for agencies in authenticating the age of inbound workers suggests the need for a checklist of measures that agencies should be held accountable for implementing.

Some agencies and employers compel workers to continue even if they are mentally or emotionally incompetent, or have decided to admit their real age. They do this to discharge the worker's debt to the agency and avoid disruption to the employer.

Often, agencies threaten workers with imprisonment if they are found to be underage.

Workers who report an agency or employer who has compelled them not to reveal their real age should be offered witness protection and immunity from prosecution.

Where underage women are traded, the agencies in both the home and destination countries should face consequences. For example, the Singapore agency could be blacklisted.

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