

## **Video**

Over the past two years of the pandemic, limited sources of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) have resulted in more employers choosing to keep their domestic workers. As we enter a new normal after the pandemic, interviewed agencies have reflected that they have seen an increase in the number of cases of FDWs seeking resignation, and employers requesting for a change of FDWs. Moreover, mental health issues prevalent during the pandemic has also affected the FDW community and have not seen improvement as the days go by. In a report released by non-governmental organisation HOME this June, findings show that an average of 70% of FDWs face language abuse by their employers every year. Some FDWs have also had suicidal thoughts due to mental illnesses. Let's find out how problems caused during the pandemic would play out post pandemic in Morning Focus.

40-Year-old Yanti comes from Indonesia, and has worked in Singapore for over 10 years.

Recalling past experiences, she would still feel fearful.

Yanti recalled in an interview, "2011 (is the) first time I (came) to Singapore, I (was) working with some (ex) employer. My employer always abuse me like slap me, hitting me, lock me in the room; I also cannot use phone; I also don't have off days. After one and half years, I have (the) chance to call my family. Before I go, I (left) my baby, and then my baby (has) passed away already."

After losing her child, Yanti has also lost her motivation to work. Also due to constant abuse and mistreatment, she eventually approached the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) to seek help,

and was housed at HOME until her case was closed. She thereafter found a new employer, and became a volunteer at HOME.

Yanti exclaims, “Every day I see the new domestic worker come with her problem, so I feel my life is still more better than her, so I feel like next time if my case done, I promise to help the other people.”

Yanti would come to this office (HOME’s help desk for domestic workers) every week to provide counselling to fellow FDWs in need. Some FDWs would also contact her via social media platforms and confide their problems to her. She exclaimed that due to the pandemic, many employers are stressed out and would vent their emotions on their FDW. Some employers have also started small businesses and would request for their FDW to help out, increasing the workload of their FDW. HOME has also observed that the pandemic has aggravated many existing problems such as language abuse, physical abuse, late or non-payment of salary, or insufficient rest time. These have all resulted in FDWs facing more stress and hence a decline in their mental health. COVID-19 measures also restricted the movement of FDWs - more FDWs are stuck at home and unable to receive adequate rest.

Jaya, Senior Research and Advocacy Manager at HOME shared that, “A lot of domestic workers face increased surveillance by their employers in that they could not move around the house freely; they could not use their communication devices freely because their employers were around all the time.”

Maid agencies have also observed that as the pandemic situation improves, cases of FDWs requesting to resign or change employers have gradually increased. This maid agency has handled more cases of FDW transfers this year as compared to last year.

Mr. Tay, director of Best Home Employment Agency mentioned, “During the pandemic, I personally feel FDWs’ and employer’s employment issues have decreased as FDWs are not encouraged to leave the house on their off days and cannot return to their home country. So, a lot of problems have been temporarily put off as employers provided extra financial remunerations while FDWs compromised and temporarily extended their contract, resigning only after the pandemic. Now, more FDWs are thinking of changing employers and vice versa, because the compromise during the pandemic has ended.”

Ms. Lee Yi Hui who is currently single but living with her elderly father has had to change to a new FDW at the start of the year as her previous FDW wanted to return home. However, the new FDW had only worked for one month when Ms. Lee realised that her work performance fell below expectations. It was later found that the FDW had been diagnosed with mood disorders.

Ms. Lee recounted, “She could remember to bring her bag home, but forget that my father is still outside the door and has not been brought back. Or when she crossed the road, she would go ahead even if there was only five seconds or nine seconds left before the traffic light turned red. One night, she suddenly left home, so I went to make a police report. After I returned home, I saw her lying down in the living room at 3am. It was only the next morning at around 8am that I knew through my first FDW that she actually went to the 12<sup>th</sup> storey, walked up barefooted and wanted to commit suicide but did not succeed.”

According to official procedures, Ms. Lee would still have to bring the FDW to the police station to record a statement before the case can be closed. The FDW was then sent to the Institute of Mental Health, after which Ms. Lee did not see that FDW again. At the same time, Ms. Lee also found her current FDW with the help of an agency.

Ms. Lee mentioned, “At that moment I did not think of it, but looking back there were indeed signs, for instance she had difficulty falling asleep at night, could not wake up in the morning, and felt very depressed. But if she was in a good mood, she could eat two to three bowls of rice. So, I did not think she had depression and that it was so serious, maybe also because I did not have people around me who suffered from depression.”

Ms. Lee counts herself lucky that her current FDW can do her job well, giving her a peace of mind. After employing three FDWs, she understood that in order to maintain a healthy employment relationship, more communication, observation and care for the FDW is essential.

Up till December last year, there are 246,000 FDWs working in Singapore. All interviewed agencies and NGOs believe that in order to protect the rights of FDWs, legal changes must be made in order to provide fair solutions, thereby improving the support network and mental health of FDWs.

Having worked in this field for 20 years, Mr. Tay confessed that the biggest limitation faced by agencies would be that they do not have the resources to step in and provide support to abused or mentally affected FDWs even if they wished to help from a humanitarian perspective.

He elaborated that, “For example, if we take in this FDW to lodge at our hostel, do we have the manpower to take care of her? And will this FDW affect the spirits and emotions of other FDWs staying here? If yes, then that will increase our burden, and could result in us facing more problems”.

Typically, FDWs would have to go through interviews before coming to Singapore. Agencies will assess if FDWs are suitable to work based on their interview performance, but are unable to gauge their mental health condition. In order to better help FDWs get used to their new job, Mr. Tay and his agency would provide FDWs with resources, such as translation booklets of basic conversations, to ease communication barriers between employers and their FDWs. They would also organise some promotional activities, including how to identify scams, preventing FDWs from falling into traps.

Mr. Tay expresses his belief that, “Rather than letting employers and their FDWs work behind closed doors and get their sources of information via incredible hearsay, which could lead to persistent arguments when their requests have not been met, have we reached a point where we can develop and make a public database for FDWs for both employers and FDWs to reference? For example, a FDW only wants to work for an elderly living alone in a small flat and refuses to work for a family even after a few years. Can she then expect her salary to be equivalent to another FDW who works in a three-storey terrace house?”

In order to alert employers and FDWs of the importance of mental health issues, the MOM has also opened classes and produced mental health guides for employers and FDWs to reference. The guide has included some possible scenarios, which could help employers and FDWs spot problems early.

The MOM's Director of Engagement under the Foreign Manpower Management Division, Tan Shu Xiang mentioned, "Possibly due to the fears of contracting COVID-19, or due to the need to make drastic arrangements to their daily lives, more people including FDWs would feel fearful and stressed. Apart from that, we are also aware that FDWs would inevitably go through a transition period when they work in Singapore, during which they might for various reasons be under pressure, such as having to adapt to their workload and having to communicate with their employers."

Aside from that, the MOM has also implemented different measures to strengthen support networks of FDWs in hopes of improving their mental health. These include home visits, setting up support helplines, keeping in contact with newly hired FDWs and conducting interview conversations.

### **Video caption**

During the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the FDW community has also experienced mental health problems, where around 70% of FDWs in Singapore suffer from abuse every year.

### **Article translation**

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the FDW community has also experienced mental health problems, which has not improved as we enter the new normal. In a report released by non-governmental organisation HOME this June, findings show that an average of 70% of FDWs face language abuse by their employers every year. Some FDWs have also had suicidal thoughts due to mental illnesses.

40-Year-old Yanti comes from Indonesia, and has worked in Singapore for over 10 years, but past experiences of being abused still leaves her fearful till date. She later sought help from the MOM and was housed at HOME. After finding a new employer, she also became a volunteer at HOME, counselling FDWs in need.

HOME has observed that the pandemic has aggravated employer's language abuse, physical abuse, delayed payment of salary, while the pandemic situation has restricted the movement of FDWs, causing immense psychological stress. Living with her elderly father, Ms. Lee Yi Hui had a new FDW at the start of the year, who also displayed symptoms of emotional instability, and was later diagnosed with mood disorders. After hiring three FDWs, Ms. Lee understood that good communication, observation and care for the FDW are key to maintaining a healthy employment relationship.

All interviewed agencies and NGOs agree that legal changes are necessary as a start to better protect FDWs' rights. But Mr. Tay who has had 20 years of experience in this field confessed that agencies lack sufficient resources and ability to care for abused or mentally ill FDWs. In order to alert employers and FDWs to the importance of mental health issues, the MOM has also organised classes and produced mental health guides, as well as conducted house visits, set up helplines and implemented other measures to strengthen support networks of FDWs, in attempt to improve their mental health.

### **[For reference] Video subtitle transcription**

在两年多的冠病疫情期间，由于女佣来源减少，更多雇主选择留住现有女佣。随着疫情好转，受访中介表示女佣想离职或雇主想换女佣的个案也逐渐增加，而疫情期间普遍出现的心理健康问题也在女佣社群里显现，而且没有随着日子恢复常态而好转。非营利组织情义之家今年六月发布的研究报告就显示本地每年平均有 70% 的外籍女佣面对雇主的言语虐待。有些女佣还因为

心理疾病而萌起自杀的念头。《晨光聚焦》我们一起去了解因疫情所产生的问题怎样在后疫情时代发酵。

40 岁的艳迪来自印度尼西亚，在新加坡工作已超过十年。回想起之前的经历她仍心有余悸。

2011 first time I coming to Singapore, I working with some (ex) employer, my employer always abuse me like slap me, hitting me, lock me in the room. I also cannot use phone; I also don't have off days after one and half years I have chance to call my family. Before I go I leave my baby, and then my baby is passed away already.

失去孩子后的艳迪也失去了工作的动力。加上持续受到虐待，她后来前往人力部寻求帮助，并被安置在非营利组织情义之家一直到案情结束。她之后找到新雇主，也成为情义之家的义工。

Every day I see the new domestic worker come with her problem, so I feel my life is still more better than her, so I feel like next time if my case done, I promise to help the other people.

艳迪每个星期都会到这个办公室为需要帮助的女佣提供辅导，一些女佣则会通过聊天平台与她联系，向她述说烦恼。她表示：受冠病疫情的影响，许多雇主因为压力过大而把情绪发泄在女佣身上。还有一些雇主因为开始在家做小生意，要求女佣帮忙，进而增加了女佣们的工作量。情义之家观察到疫情加剧了许多原有的问题，像是被雇主的言语霸凌、肢体虐待、拖欠薪水，或是没有给予足够的休息时间等，这些都导致女佣承受了巨大压力，心理健康走下坡，而防疫措施也让女佣们的活动受到限制。更多女佣被困在加，无法得到适当的休息。

佳雅: A lot of domestic workers face increased surveillance by their employers in that they could not move around the house freely, they could not use their communication devices freely because their employers were around all the time.

女佣中介则观察到随着疫情慢慢好转，女佣要求离职或更换雇主的个案逐渐增加。这家女佣介绍中心今年处理的女佣更换个案就比去年同期多。

郑坤明 安利康女佣中心总监：在疫情期间，我个人觉得女佣和雇主的雇佣问题相对减少。那个时候女佣不鼓励出门休假、她们不能回国，那么很多问题都是雇主配合以加薪的方式暂延那个问题，那么女佣也妥协用短暂续约的方式，一直到疫情过后才辞呈。现在有比较多女佣想转换雇主以及雇主想换女佣的问题，因为在疫情期间的所有的妥协都已经到期了。

目前单身，和年迈父亲同住的李怡慧在今年初因前女佣要回乡而换了一名新女佣。但新女佣工作一个月后她就发现女佣的工作表现不达标而且情绪非常不稳定。经过诊断，发现女佣患上狂躁症。

李怡慧：她可以记得把包包放到家里面，可是她忘记说我爸爸还在门口还没带进来。或者是，过马路的时候，即使马路可能只剩下五秒钟、九秒钟，但是她还是继续过。有一天晚上，她就突然之间离家出走了，所以我去警察局报案，那报案之后我回来，大概凌晨 3 点的时候，我看到她躺在客厅，等到隔天早上八点透过我的第一女佣才问她说原来她前一天的晚上跑到楼上 12 楼去了，然后赤着脚走上去想要跳楼但是最后没有跳成。

按照警方程序，即使要消案怡慧还是必须带女佣到警局录口供。女佣后来被送到心理卫生学院后就再也没有见到她。同时，中介也为怡慧找到了现任女佣。

李怡慧: 当下没有想到，但是回过头确实有症状，就比如说她晚上睡不着觉、早上没法起床，然后整个人就是很抑郁的。但是如果她心情很好的时候，她可以吃两、三碗饭。我当下不会觉得她是忧郁症，那么严重，因为可能我身边也没有真的有人经历过这个忧郁症。



怡慧很庆幸现在的女佣能够把工作做好并且让她安心。在雇佣过三名女佣后，她体会到想要和女佣保持良好的雇佣关系需要多沟通、多细心观察和关心女佣。

截至去年 12 月，本地有 24 万 6000 名外籍女佣在本地工作。受访中介和非营利组织都认为如果要维护女佣的权益，必须从立法做起，才能够找到公平的解决方案，从而改善女佣的支持网和心理健康。

Jaya: these are very long-term changes that I'm suggesting, where domestic workers are included under the employment act, perhaps even giving them a live-out option, because a lot of times the fatigue and exhaustion comes from almost round the clock work, round the clock care. And we all feel better when we can leave our office to go home and sometimes the same thing just needs to happen for domestic workers.

在这行有 20 多年经验的郑坤明说：中介们最大的限制在于，即使基于人道主义立场介入，他们没有足够的资源和能力去照顾受虐待或是精神状况欠佳的女佣。

郑坤明: 举个例子，如果我们接受这个女佣入住我们的宿舍，我们有没有这样的员工能够可以照顾这个女佣？那么这个女佣是否会影响到其他入住女佣的情绪，如果会的话那会增加我们的工作压力，使到我们面对更多的问题。

一般上女佣在来新加坡之前都需要通过面试，中介会通过面试内容来评估女佣们是否符合工作要求，却没有办法了解她们的精神状况。为了更好地帮助女佣融入新工作，郑坤明的公司会为女佣提供资源，像是基本对话的翻译手册，减少雇主和女佣无法沟通的困难，以及举办一些推广活动，包括如何辨别欺诈手法，避免女佣落入骗局。

我也觉得与其让雇主和女佣闭门造车、道听途说，因为自己的各项需求而吵个不休，是不是已经到了一个时候我们应该开发和公开女佣的数据库，让雇主和女佣参考？举一个例子：有一个女佣她只想在一个独居老人的小房子里面工作，那么她工作了几年她也不愿意去其他的家庭工作。请问，她的薪水是否应该继续和一个在三层楼洋房工作的朋友一样高？

为了让雇主和女佣更关注心理健康问题的重要性，人力部也主办课程以及推出心理健康手册，供雇主和女佣参考。手册里包含了一些可能发生的情景，让雇主或女佣能及早发现问题。

陈书祥 人力部外来人力管理署外展处处长：可能是因为对感染冠病的恐惧，或者是需要在日常生活中做出很多不同的调整，那可能更多人包括女佣在内，会因此感到恐惧、有压力。除此之外，我们也意识到女佣在新加坡工作期间，她们必定会经过一个过渡期，而且在工作这个期间，她们也可能会因为某种原因，例如要适应工作的量而且要怎么样跟雇主沟通而产生压力。

此外人力部也透过不同的方式，包括进行家访、设立更多援助热线、和新入职的女佣保持联系、进行面试会谈，加强女佣的支持网，进而促进她们的心理健康。