

HOME's Response to Ministry of Manpower Video on Withheld Wages

The Ministry of Manpower's (MOM) latest video [1] warning employers against withholding a domestic worker's (DW) salary is timely and important. In the past year, HOME recorded approximately 200 complaints involving unpaid/withheld salaries at our domestic worker helpdesk.

In the video, the domestic worker 'Leticia' (portrayed by local actor Michelle Chong) seeks out her agent, who advises her to speak to her employer or approach MOM. In the end, the problem is resolved when 'Leticia' tells her employer this is not allowed.

We are encouraged by and support MOM's efforts to raise awareness about this issue and the attempt to make it engaging. However, this depiction does not recognize the reality that the domestic worker-employer relationship is gravely unequal. Domestic workers are often afraid to assert their rights for fear of losing their jobs. Some may even 'consent' to employers withholding part or all of their salaries. This choice must be recognized as one made under immense pressure – domestic workers are wholly dependent on employers for their employment and legal status in the country. Objecting may be ineffective, at best, or lead to dismissal, at worst.

In HOME's experience, domestic workers who file complaints at MOM about salaries being withheld are usually able to claim their arrears. However, by then, they have already lost their jobs. Domestic workers in such situations are sometimes told by MOM they are not able to transfer to a new employer without their current employer's consent: this means their livelihood relies on the whims of an employer who has violated labour laws; it also gives employers the power to punish the DW for filing a complaint against them.

HOME has also encountered cases where domestic workers complain about their money being withheld but are told by MOM their employers were simply 'safekeeping' their salary. This depiction of employers wanting to 'help' domestic workers 'save' money – which the video also reinforces – frames as benign what is a clear infringement of the Employment of Manpower Act (EFMA), which states that domestic workers must be paid their fixed monthly salaries no later than seven days of a salary period; a salary period cannot exceed one month. Recognizing the withholding of salaries as an offence requires penalizing employers and ensuring that domestic workers who file formal complaints about such practices are able to seek alternative employment.

Additionally, MOM's decision to cast Michelle Chong as a Filipino domestic worker in its public service announcement is disappointing. While Chong is a known comedic actress and we appreciate that the video is intended to be lighthearted, her 'Leticia' is a crude caricature and reinforces the idea that domestic workers are appropriate targets of ridicule. Chong's dim-witted character encourages exaggerated stereotypes of the community as compliant

1 https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1574958485886746&id=103944372988172

and uncomplaining, without questioning how Singaporean cultural norms and laws socialize them to be subservient.

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