

Rights groups want more support to help maids tackle mental health issues

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More initiatives are being rolled out to help foreign domestic workers cope with the transition, but one rights group is calling for more to be done to address "deep structural issues" such as not being able to switch employers freely.

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By Vanessa Paige Chehvan Posted 13 Sep 2016 18:11 Updated 13 Sep 2016 18:20



Domestic workers in Singapore (File photo: TODAY)

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SINGAPORE: The case of a maid who repeatedly assaulted her employer's 96-year-old mother has brought into focus again the issue of foreign domestic workers who suffer from psychological disorders but may find it difficult to access support and assistance.

Murni Panengsih pleaded guilty on Sep 5 to five counts of causing hurt to the elderly woman, who was bedridden and in poor health at the time. The 25-year-old was sentenced to 10 months in jail.

The court heard how Murni had been suffering from Adjustment Disorder during the time she carried out the repeated assaults. The Indonesian had worked for the family for about one year and nine months from October 2013 and "did not have a single day off". She was also cut off from her family in Indonesia, including her four-year-old son, psychiatrist Dr John Bosco Lee noted in his report.

Cases where maids carry out violent attacks while suffering mental illness regularly hit the headlines.

Burmese maid Than Than Win, for one, was jailed 13 years for stabbing 87-year-old Madam Yong Wan Lan to death with a pair of scissors in March 2014. The 25-year-old was diagnosed with depressive disorder with psychotic symptoms, and her father revealed the family has a history of mental illness. That meant she was spared the noose after pleading guilty to reduced culpable homicide charges.

Statistics show more than two in 10 domestic helpers here could be classified as having poor mental health, according to a 2015 survey by HOME (Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics), a migrant workers' rights group.

In Than Than Win's case, prosecutors acknowledged it would be "a challenge" for the court to sentence her, and a High Court Justice wondered how a foreigner with a severe mental illness had been allowed to work in Singapore.

EMPLOYEES, NOT HIRED SERVANTS

In response to queries, the Ministry of Manpower told Channel NewsAsia all foreign domestic workers must undergo a pre-employment medical examination, which includes "a basic assessment of the mental state of the (domestic worker)".

However, Dr Mok Yee Ming, chief of the Institute of Mental Health's general psychiatry department, explained it is difficult to comprehensively screen domestic helpers if they are unwilling to volunteer personal and social information.

Rights groups such as HOME and the Centre for Domestic Employees (CDE) are not supportive of mandatory mental health checks beyond the basic assessment currently in place.

CDE Chairman Yeo Guat Kwang said this would be "quite discriminatory". It would suggest most helpers have a higher risk of developing mental health issues, when this may not be true, Mr Yeo said.

HOME's Executive Director Jolovan Wham told Channel NewsAsia the bigger problem is some of the women are developing mental health problems because of the work environment. "The key problem lies in the lack of social support and the lack of employment protection.

"It's in everyone's benefit to ensure the mental health of our migrant workers are taken care of," Mr Wham said, calling for employers to "view domestic workers as employees, instead of hired servants".

Indonesian maid Dewi Sukowati was jailed 18 years for killing socialite Madam Nancy Gan in March 2014, whose body she dumped into the pool to make it seem the 69-year-old had committed suicide.

Madam Gan had severely scolded Dewi for serving her with a plastic tray, when she had expected to be served with a silver tray. Dewi "lost control" after her employer hit her on the head with the tray and threw a glass of water in her face. She grabbed Mdm Gan by the hair and swung her head against the wall. Then she dragged the unconscious woman outside and flipped her body face down into the swimming pool.

The 20-year-old was later diagnosed with Acute Stress Reaction by IMH psychiatrist Dr Kenneth Koh, who remarked that Dewi's "young age ... sudden dispatch to a vastly different culture ... (and) her past history of abuse (which) enhanced (her) sensitivity to further abuse at the hands of a perfectionistic employer" had caused her to "react instantaneously without heed of the consequences", Dr Koh said.

LITTLE POWER AGAINST BIG DEMANDS

Even if domestic helpers do not have a history of mental illness before they arrive in Singapore, they face a multitude of challenges which could result in problems developing.

Mental illnesses are "multifactorial", explained Dr Mok, who also heads IMH's mood disorders unit. "A new and unfamiliar environment, a different culture, as well as social isolation are certainly stressors," Dr Mok said, and a person's personality and maturity can also affect their ability to cope.

The psychiatrist recommended preventive measures, such as access to good social support, to curb the likelihood of becoming mentally ill. HOME and CDE both operate helplines, and HOME provides shelter, counselling and legal advice to troubled maids.

CDE has recently launched a mobile kiosk, which will be deployed to common areas where maids gather on their days off. This will allow domestic helpers and employers to get advice from centre staff on the spot.

However, Mr Wham says there is "no point" in having these support services available without addressing "deep structural issues" which make it difficult for helpers to take advantage of these services.

Mr Wham brought up the fact that maids are not allowed to switch employers freely. "If employers have the right to terminate (helpers) at a whim ... the social infrastructure that we say is necessary, will not be useful. Because the domestic workers themselves will be afraid of seeking help", Mr Wham said.

This allows employers to "make all sorts of unreasonable demands" because maids have "very little bargaining power", he said. "I see the mental health problems that domestic helpers suffer from as very intricately linked to inadequate employment protection.

"Nine out of 10 of the women who come to us for help complain of verbal abuse ... if you don't feel like you're being treated with respect and dignity in the workplace, then your stress levels will go up," Mr Wham said.

But rather than quit, many maids choose to continue working. "They find themselves pushed to the margins because of their debt obligations, family obligations, and the fact that they can't switch employers freely ... so they have no choice." Mr Wham said.

Indonesian maid Tuti Aeliyah killed her employer's 16-year-old daughter Shameera Basha Noor Basha in November 2013, strangling the schoolgirl to death with her own pinafore. Tuti had tried to smother the teen in her sleep, but stabbed her when she awoke and put up a struggle. After Shameera had fallen to the floor, she wrapped the pinafore around the girl's neck, and pulled.

Tuti, who was sentenced to 12 years' jail, was found to have been severely depressed with psychotic symptoms.

While there were no reports of ill treatment, Tuti had reportedly requested for a change in employers, because Shameera's mother, her employer, was "too strict". Tuti had also begun acting oddly a few months before the killing, prompting Shameera's mother to seek help from her maid agency.

The Indonesian maid had also attempted suicide the night before, and immediately after, killing Shameera. Her lawyer said she had been stressed; Tuti's unemployed husband reportedly pressured her to send money to him.

WITHOUT FEAR OF REPRIMAND OR REPATRIATION

To improve the mental well-being of maids, "a good employer-employee relationship is key", Mr Yeo of CDE said. "It is in the employer's interest to ensure their (domestic helper) is able to share their concerns without fear or reprimand or repatriation", and this will help them to cope with the demands of their work, he added.

Maid agencies can play a part in ensuring the well-being of maids here. It would be "helpful" for agencies to make house visits in the initial months of a first-time maid's employment to check if she is settling in well, said Mr Yeo. He suggested the agencies' staff should also be trained to detect signs of mental distress and be able to provide appropriate advice.

Mr Wham went a step further, saying he supports the live-out option, which would allow domestic helpers to clock in and clock out. This way, a healthy boundary is maintained between employee and employer, and allows domestic helpers to get a break, he said.

"At the moment, everything seems to be done by coercion, threats. That's not the right way to motivate someone", Mr Wham said. "If you want them to work better, you need to take care of them as human beings."

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