

By Invitation

# Foreign domestic workers: A suggested rule book

An affluent society like Singapore can afford to treat its vulnerable workers, such as foreign domestic workers, better



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For *The Straits Times*

There are approximately 250,000 foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore.

My wife and I used to employ domestic helpers in Singapore, New York and Washington. In our relationship with our domestic helpers, we tried to uphold the following rules which I offer for Singaporeans to consider.

## RULE NO. 1: TREAT HER AS A FELLOW PERSON

The most important rule is to treat your domestic helper as a fellow human being. She does not belong to some inferior sub-species of the human family. She is also not your slave. She is entitled to respect for her human dignity.

Poverty has caused your domestic helper to leave her family to come and work for you. She has made a huge self-sacrifice in order to send money home to her family. Show some understanding and appreciation.

The FDWs have enabled our women to pursue their careers. They cook for us and keep our homes clean and tidy. They look after our children and grandchildren, our aged or disabled parents or grandparents. The comfortable life we enjoy in Singapore is due, in no small part, to the FDWs.

## RULE NO. 2: TREAT HER AS A FAMILY MEMBER

The second rule is to treat your domestic helper as a member of your family. When we went out to

eat, in New York or Washington, we would invite our domestic helper to join us. When we went on an excursion, we would take our domestic helper along. For example, we took them to see shows on Broadway. When we had no visitors, we would eat our dinners in the kitchen and ask our domestic helper to join us.

Since our domestic helper is a member of our family, she should be entitled to follow us, wherever we go. No hotel, restaurant or club should bar the entry of our domestic helper. In this respect, the Tanglin Club, the American Club and the Cricket Club should emulate the good example of the Singapore Island Country Club.

## RULE NO. 3: A ROOM OF HER OWN

My third rule is to provide your domestic helper with a room of her own.

We all need privacy. The domestic helper is no exception. After a day's hard work, she needs to have a private space she can retire to, to rest, to listen to music, to watch TV and to talk to her family back home.

I remember visiting the home of a wealthy friend. He showed me around his spacious new house. At the end of the tour, I asked him and his wife where the domestic helper's room was.

She replied that the helper slept either on the couch in the living room or on the floor in the kitchen. I was tempted to ask why they did not let her stay in one of the empty rooms I saw but my wife stopped me.

Employers with sufficient rooms in their homes who do not provide adequate accommodation have a bad attitude towards their helper.

Many Singaporeans live in apartments and may lack the space to give the domestic helper a room of her own. In such cases, she should be given sufficient space and privacy in a bedroom shared



with family members.

I am also unhappy with the size of the so-called maid's room in some of our new buildings. They are smaller than a prison cell. I appeal to our building authorities to consider prescribing a more generous space for the maid's room. It is inconsiderate and unkind to build such tiny spaces for our domestic helpers.

## RULE NO. 4: FEED HER WELL

My fourth rule is to provide your domestic helper with adequate and nutritious food.

My wife and I observed the rule that our domestic helper would eat the same food as ourselves. If we had lobsters for dinner, we would buy one for our helper. We did not ask our helper to eat separate and inferior food.

I am sad to say that some employers do not allow their helpers to eat the same food but to eat a different and inferior diet. As a result, some of the domestic helpers in Singapore have

complained to the two non-governmental organisations, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) and the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home), about inadequate or poor-quality food.

In fact, concerns about food and nutrition are among the top five issues raised by FDWs. Many domestic helpers are concerned about whether they will have enough to eat when employers go on vacation, leaving them at home. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has even had to send reminders to employers to make arrangements for the FDW to have food.

MOM even has to spell out a requirement that employers must provide FDWs with three meals a day, enough for a female engaged in moderate activity. This includes four slices of bread with spread for breakfast, and rice, cooked vegetables, a palm-sized amount of meat, and fruit for lunch and dinner.

Media reports periodically crop

up of employers who starve their maid. A 2017 case involved a couple who starved their maid for more than a year and caused her weight to plummet from 49kg to 29.4kg.

Such behaviour by employers who starve their maids is shameful, especially in an affluent society like Singapore.

## RULE NO. 5: NEVER BE VIOLENT

My fifth rule is that, under no circumstances can an employer behave violently towards his helper. It is shocking to read so many horror stories in our media about employers physically abusing their employees.

I wonder how a civilised country like Singapore produces such human monsters. It is a sad truth that we have compatriots who are sadists and psychopaths, or who are mentally so disturbed they vent their rage on innocent and vulnerable people.

I wish MOM would require every potential employer of an FDW to go for a psychological test. It would

help to disqualify the psychopaths and sadists from the right to employ domestic helpers.

I am glad that our police and our courts take a serious view of such physical abuse. Under our Penal Code, a judge could increase the punishment for an offender of a domestic helper by 1½ times. The court could also bar such an offender from employing domestic helpers.

## RULE NO. 6: NO VERBAL ABUSE

My sixth rule is no verbal abuse. A domestic helper has the right to be protected against both physical and verbal abuse.

A helper who is subjected daily to verbal abuse by her employer would suffer psychological damage. She would feel humiliated and depressed. She would feel a loss of self-respect and dignity.

The employer and his helper enjoy an unequal power relationship. In such a situation, we cannot expect the helper to stand up to her abusive employer.

The abused employee needs our help. I am glad that we have TWC2 and Home to champion their cause, and that our ministry and law enforcement officers take abuse seriously.

## RULE NO. 7: GIVE ENOUGH REST

My seventh rule is that the domestic helper is entitled to adequate rest. Since 2013, the law requires all employers to give their domestic workers a weekly day of rest.

According to Ms Madeleine Poh, writing in the Singapore Law Review, not all employers have followed the law. In addition to a weekly day of rest, a good employer should also give his employee some rest time every day.

My wife used to give our domestic helpers two hours to rest every afternoon. Employers should remember that their domestic helpers are human beings and not robots or machines. When my wife and I entertained at night, we would tell our domestic helper to go to her room to rest at 10pm.

## CONCLUSION

In Singapore, foreign domestic workers are protected by the Penal Code and by the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act. They are not protected by the Employment Act, unlike Hong Kong, which covers them under the Employment Ordinance.

In 2011, the International Labour Organisation, of which Singapore is a member, adopted the Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers. President Halimah Yacob, when she was a trade unionist, played a major role in the adoption of the convention. The convention came into force in 2013 and has 29 states parties.

The convention requires a state party to guarantee domestic workers the same rights as other workers, regarding daily and weekly rest periods, working hours, overtime compensation, paid annual leave and adequate protection against violence.

I hope that, one day, Singapore will become a party to this convention.

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