

**Migrant Labor in Southeast Asia**

**Country Study: Singapore**

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## 1. Introduction

Since the late 1970s Singapore has turned into one of the major receiving countries of foreign workers in Southeast Asia. With 612,200 foreign workers constituting 29.2% of the total workforce in the year 2000, Singapore now has the highest proportion of foreign workers in the labour force in Asia. About 500,000 of these foreign workers fall under the category of unskilled or low-skilled (of those, currently 135,000 are male construction workers and 150,000 are female domestic workers).

Malaysia has historically represented a 'traditional source country' for migrant labour in Singapore, but since 1978 flows have ebbed due to Malaysia's own economic development. As a result the so-called 'non-traditional source countries', such as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Thailand, began to be resorted to in order to meet persistent labour shortages. In addition, the expansion of the middle classes and women's increasing entry into the labour market has triggered a rise in demand for foreign domestic workers in the context of a lack of state-sponsored child (and other) care facilities. Today, one in seven households in Singapore employs a foreign maid. Singapore is also known for its recruitment of so-called "foreign talent", i.e. professional and highly skilled workers.

To manage the fairly large number of foreign workers within its midst, the government of Singapore has implemented clear migration policies with visa categories available for all skill levels. Unlike many other migrant receiving countries, Singapore provides legal employment opportunities not only for skilled, but also for unskilled workers.

Non-governmental concerns for and involvement in migrant labour issues has a relatively short history. Some grassroots activism and service provisioning existed in the late 1980s, and there are numerous (but small) skills centers that have existed for a decade. The plight of foreign workers was for quite some time "off-limits" to socially active citizens because of its association with the "Marxist Conspiracy" case in 1987. In May 1987, 22 people were arrested under the ISA (Internal Security Act) for allegedly threatening the state and national interests. Those arrested included Catholic social workers and lay workers at the Geylang Catholic Center for Foreign Workers. They lobbied for higher wages, social security benefits, job security and employment conditions for all foreign workers. The Catholic Church was seen as a "cover for political agitation" and the Geylang Center was subsequently closed. This 'historical' incident partly explains the Catholic Church's and other civil society organisations' reluctance to address the needs of foreign workers for many years after 1987 (Lyons 2005). Since 1995, more organizations offering a range of services/projects as well as advocacy have again appeared. This happened largely in response to the Flor Contemplacion case<sup>1</sup> which triggered the gradual rise of

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<sup>1</sup> Flor Contemplacion, a Filipino domestic helper, was arrested for the murders of domestic worker and friend, Delia Maga, and Maga's employer's child, Nicolas, in 1991. She was subsequently executed in 1995. This affected diplomatic relations between Singapore and the Philippines very badly, partly because of widespread NGO campaigns in the Philippines and by Filipinos elsewhere. The Singaporean government has been accused of acting in a very insensitive manner by NGOs in Singapore; the entire staff of the Philippine Embassy was replaced by the Philippine government for reacting too slowly and inefficiently on behalf of Flor Contemplacion.

public attention regarding migrant workers' welfare and rights. During the last couple of years, media coverage of various migrant worker issues has also increased.<sup>2</sup>

The trade union movement in Singapore has 'historically' (starting in 1969) followed a strategy of acting in partnership with the state. Since 1969, trade unions no longer confined themselves to collective bargaining for the workers, but also concerned themselves with the overall economic development, productivity, and performance of the society at large. In this sense, it has been argued that the labour movement has transformed itself from a wage-negotiating to a nation-building institution (Sing 2002: 22).

This report covers existing NGO and trade union activities revolving around migrant workers in Singapore. It relies upon a wide variety of reports and materials originating from non-governmental organizations (local and international NGOs as well as trade unions), academic papers, international organizations (ILO) as well as interviews with key informants/senior staff at NGOs and trade unions.

## **2. Overview of the Country's Migrant Labour Context**

### **2.1 General Labour Market Situation**

Singapore's extraordinary record of growth between 1960 and 2000 resulted in enormous benefits to workers in all sectors. Much of Singapore's economic success is typically attributed to its human resources policies. Changes in its labour law in the 1960s created an extremely flexible labour market, and relaxed regulations on working hours and dismissals, while at the same time it initiated programs that provided workers with unemployment benefits and paid medical leave. Its use of educational policy emphasizing training in technology and computer fields helped upgrade skill levels.

As of June 2001, out of a total population of 4.02 million, Singapore's labour force stood at 2.12 million, a 27% increase over the last decade (MOM: 2002c:ix, quoted in Frost and Chiu, 2003). The unemployment rate was 3.4% (72,900 persons), a 78.95% increase over the course of the decade (ibid.). Educational attainment levels have increased significantly. Singaporean workers with a diploma or degree have more than doubled over the past decade and now account for 27.5% of the total workforce. The relatively high educational level among the national workforce largely explains the demand for unskilled foreign workers in certain sectors/jobs. The fact that Singapore's workforce is an aging one is another reason for the relatively large non-resident population (now accounting for 18.6% of the total population, or 754,500 persons).

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<sup>2</sup> The *New Paper* has carried regular stories for the past two years, the nature of which are more on the welfare of migrant workers and cases of injustice. The newspaper *Today* has also published stories on domestic workers from time to time due to the editor's close ties with TWC2. The mainstream press like Straits Times and the Chinese newspapers typically cover stories on migrant workers in the context of court cases. Sometimes they follow up with a story on the issue or commission a poll to see what public sentiment is like – or when the MOM puts out a press release (email communication with journalist, July 11, 2005).

Singapore's industrial composition has changed over the past decade (see Table 1). Whereas the manufacturing sector was once dominant, financial and business services along with community and personal services have grown significantly. This is in line with the prevailing trend towards a knowledge-based economy.

**Table 1: Industrial Composition, 1991 & 2001**

Industrial Composition (%)	1991	2001	Change (%)
Manufacturing	28.2	18.8	- 33.3
Commerce	22.7	21.1	- 7.0
Transport and Communication	10.0	11.1	+ 10.0
Financial and Business Services	10.7	17.2	+ 37.8
Community and Personal Services	21.1	24.7	+ 14.6
Others	7.3	7.1	- 2.7

*Source:* MOM 2002, quoted in Frost and Chiu, 2003: 6.

With regard to the distribution of employment by sector in 2002, 75% were in services, 24% in industry, 1% in agriculture and fishing; manufacturing accounted for 18%. There was a downward trend in manufacturing but this sector still employed the largest number of workers in 2002 (368,000).

## 2.2 Profile of Migrant Labour

Singapore began to experience a shortage of labour in the early 1960s. This gradually resulted in a demand for foreign workers of all categories. Demand for semi- and unskilled workers has been on the increase since 1984. Initially, a large number of such workers from Thailand and elsewhere were illegal. Since then, the government has revised its migration policies and imposed fines on employers in order to drastically reduce the number of illegal workers.

Malaysians make up the largest nationality group with a total of approximately 200,000. From among the 150,000 foreign domestic workers (hereafter: FDWs), most come from Indonesia (about half), followed by the Philippines and Sri Lanka. The population of male foreign workers is mostly composed of Southeast and South Asians, with Thais constituting the largest group, followed by South Asians (ca. 50,000 Bangladeshis, according to Rahman and Fee, 2005), Indonesians and Chinese.

Today, approx. 500,000 to 600,000 foreign workers are employed legally in Singapore, constituting nearly 30% of the total workforce. The bulk is comprised of low skilled and household labourers whose monthly wages are about 14% of the average Singaporean wage. In the 1990s, nine out of ten construction workers in Singapore used to be migrants (ILO 1999), but

this figure has dropped due to a slowdown in this sector. It is now shipbuilding and repair which is experiencing an upsurge in demand for foreign workers.

Apart from domestic work, the health sector constitutes another significant employer of foreign women. According to the Singapore Nursing Board's Annual Report of 2003, there were a total of 18,392 Registered and Enrolled nurses, of whom 2818 RNs and 1807 ENs were foreign. They were mainly from the Philippines, Republic of China, Malaysia and others like Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The numbers have apparently not changed much in the past few years. Nursing homes are mainly staffed by foreign nursing assistants, some of whom may be registered/enrolled nurses in their own countries (email communication, Singapore Nursing Association, July 12, 2005).

### 2.3 Policy Framework and Issues

Singapore's labour management policy is open to migrant workers with professional skills (of whom there are about 80,000, according to the Acting Minister for Manpower, Ng Eng Hen; *The Sunday Times*, September 5, 2004), but it is rather strict vis-à-vis semi-skilled and unskilled workers in the construction, shipbuilding and ship-repair, and other menial labour-intensive industries as well as in domestic services. The latter enjoy fewer entitlements than the former. Singapore's policy has been described as remaining "firmly committed to ensuring that unskilled and low-skilled foreign workers are managed as a temporary and controlled phenomenon through a series of measures, key among which are the work permit system, the dependency ceiling (which regulates the proportion of foreign to local workers), and the foreign worker levy." (Huang and Yeoh, 2003:80). For domestic workers, there is also a 'security bond' (S\$ 5,000) imposed upon employers to ensure the maid does not 'run away' and leaves the country when her contract expires.

The majority of unskilled and semi-skilled workers come through legal work placement agencies on employment contracts for a maximum of two years (subject to a one-off renewal). Their wage is lower than that of Singaporeans and Malaysians (in the 1990s, S\$ 450-600 per month for Thais and Bangladeshis, whereby their expenses for daily maintenance per month were S\$ 150; Prompiam 1996). Among domestic workers, there is no standard employment contract and wage levels are linked to national origin, with Filipinos usually being the best paid, followed by Indonesians and then by Sri Lankans.

There are three main visa categories available to foreign workers: 1. semi-permanent residents with semi-permanent work permits who are allowed to take any job anywhere in Singapore (valid for five years); 2. foreign professionals with annual permits called employment passes which are issued only for specific jobs and for a specific duration (valid for one to five years); 3. seasonal workers with short-term permits usually valid for two years (subject to renewal). Foreigners falling within the first category are eligible to apply for citizenship. Just like citizens, they face no restrictions in the labour market and can bring their families (spouses, however, do not have the automatic right to work). Although tied to a specific company, employment pass holders enjoy limitless opportunities to get their permits extended. Work permits are also given to unskilled workers whose salaries are low by local standards but who do not enjoy the same entitlements as professionals.

Unskilled migrants are the only group of foreign workers subject to the *Employment of Foreign Workers Act* of 1990 (hereafter: EFW Act). This Act defines foreign workers as “non-citizens who are looking for jobs or are in employment and who earn not more than \$ 1,500 a month” and is designed to control the employment of this category of foreign workers in Singapore. All migrants earning below S\$ 1,500 per month are covered by this Act, including FDWs. It is a serious offence for any foreign worker to work or for any employer to employ a foreign worker without such a work permit.

A work permit is issued by the Ministry of Manpower to allow a foreign worker to engage in employment in Singapore. It is valid only for the occupation, the employer, the specified worker and for the stated period it is issued for. A police officer or an employment inspector may arrest any person who is working without a work permit. This being the case, Section 13 of the EFW Act stipulates that a foreign worker must produce his/her permit for inspection whenever necessary, and return his/her work pass through the employer to the Ministry within seven days of stopping work. A work permit holder is not permitted to marry a Singaporean citizen (Frost and Chiu 2003).

Section 11 of the EFW Act states that any employer hiring a foreign worker is required to pay a levy imposed by the Minister of Labour. Employers must keep a register of all foreign workers. Section 24 of the EFW Act, however, allows a foreign worker to claim wages and benefits from an employer for the period the employer has hired him/her to work without a valid work pass, if the worker can prove the employer has hired him/her (*ibid.*).

Singapore has a general Employment Act covering all un- and lower skilled workers, local and foreign, except for domestic workers and seamen who are explicitly excluded. The explanation for this is the different nature of working environments compared to that of a traditional factory/industrial workplace. There is no minimum wage for foreign workers as is also the case with locals. Wages are given according to productivity and determined by tripartite wage council. The wage levels of FDWs are affected by direct demand and supply factors<sup>3</sup>. Officially, a worker is not supposed to work for more than 44 hours. A safe working environment is to be ensured. Participation in a half-day health and safety course in the native language of the foreign workers is mandatory as far as the construction sector is concerned. Group medical insurance is to be purchased by employers for foreigners. Employers must also ensure a job before foreign recruitment. A foreign worker levy is imposed to bring the gap between foreign and local skill levels closer through training (but the latter is not provided to FDWs).

The Factories Act safeguards workers’ health and safety in the workplace and the Workmen’s Compensation Act provides for compensation to workers injured at work. Both Acts cover local and foreign workers equally. Health care standards are also the same for local and foreign

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<sup>3</sup> And there is ample evidence of different nationality groups undercutting each other. For instance, the numbers of Indonesian FDWs rose in response to Filipinos demanding a minimum wage. More recently, when the Indonesian Embassy started charging extra contract fees and were exploring minimum wage policy for their FDWs in Singapore, the Singapore government began considering to ‘import’ FDWs from Vietnam and Cambodia (personal conversation with the NTUC’s Migrant Worker Forum, October 2005). Similar evidence exists in the case of Taiwan (according to A/ Prof. Pei-Chia Lan).

workers alike. The Skills Development and Levy Act provides for training for all workers, local and foreign, but there is no training for domestic workers.

Workers who register their claims with the MOM will be issued special passes to remain in Singapore while their claims are being settled<sup>4</sup>.

### *FDWs*

Since the infamous Flor Contemplacion case in 1995 (see footnote 1), the government has become aware of the diplomatic embarrassment maid abuse can cause and blacken its image abroad (a concern in view of losing global investors). It has therefore taken some measures aimed at providing some minimum services to FDWs. The Ministry of Manpower (hereafter: MOM) provides conciliation services (the Foreign Workers Unit was set up in 1997; a help-line for maids is run from there) in case of complaints from domestic workers. If an issue cannot be resolved in this manner, however, domestic workers do not have recourse to the courts because they are not covered by the Employment Act. In addition, MOM has designed guidelines and a 'training course' for first time employers.

Partly in response to increased exposure and rising incidents of 'problem cases', the MOM has made more moves to improve the safety and welfare of FDWs:

- introduction of a compulsory orientation programme for all first time employers in April 2004;
- accreditation as a requirement for employment agencies to get their licenses renewed in June 2004; this is done by two bodies, the Consumers Association of Singapore and Association of Employment Agencies Singapore; certification is meant to maintain standards in an industry of some 700 employment agencies; the certification is valid for four years;
- monitoring of employers who change their domestic workers frequently since October 2004; all employers who make five or more work permit applications in a year must go back to the classroom for the employers' orientation programme;
- raising of minimum age for FDWs to 23 and introduction of educational pre-requisites in January 2005; FDWs must have proof of at least eight years of formal education;
- requirement for employers spelled out for the first time in work permit conditions: they must pay an FDW's salary every month and no later than seven days after the last day of that month (February 2005);
- introduction of multiple-choice entry test in English for all new domestic workers in April 2005; FDWs have to pass the test within three working days of their arrival in Singapore. (Sim Chi Yin, *New Paper*, June 13, 2005).

Parliament passed an amendment to the Penal Code that mandated more severe penalties for confining or sexually abusing a domestic helper. Warnings to employers of the heavier penalties

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<sup>4</sup> This stands in stark contrast to Malaysia where the migrant workers do not get permits to stay, unless they are prepared to pay MYR 100 per month (which is difficult as the migrants are not allowed to continue working while waiting for their dispute/claim being resolved).

under the amended Penal Code<sup>5</sup> if they are found abusing their FDWs are clearly outlined in the MOM's *Guide For Employers* (Yeoh et al., 2004).

### *Illegal employment*

The Government amended the Immigration Act in 1995 in an attempt to curtail employers who are hiring foreign workers who are residing in the country illegally. Due to various measures designed to regulate the employment of foreign workers, such as the foreign worker levy and implementation of a dependency ratio which is adjusted periodically to reflect the supply and demand in the labour market, many employers had resorted to hiring non-registered foreigners, particularly in the construction industry. The amendments include the following provisions:

- Contractors are now responsible for illegal workers found residing or working on worksites. Unlike the previous situation, they can no longer pass the responsibility to sub-contractors by denying knowledge of the workers' immigration status.
- The onus of proof with regard to the immigration status of workers now resides solely with the employer. Prosecutors are no longer required to prove that employers knew their employees were illegal immigrants. In the past, prosecutions often failed because employers were able to claim that they did not know their employees were illegal immigrants.
- Employers of illegal workers are subject to heavy fines. Repeated offenders may even be jailed or caned.

According to the NTUC's Migrant Worker Forum, in 2004, 521 local employers were prosecuted in Singapore for illegally employing migrant workers<sup>6</sup>.

## 2.4 Political-Economic and Social Issues

Trade union membership is in principle open to foreign workers, but in practice the membership of migrant workers is tied to certain sectors, with domestic workers being totally left out because of their 'non-traditional' employment situation.

According to the chairperson of the Migrant Workers Forum at the SNTUC, the key issues and concerns for foreign workers centre mainly upon workplace grievances which can be broadly classified under two headings: 1) employment related, and 2) welfare, occupational health and safety issues. Employment-related issues are mainly about non-payment or under-payment of wages and unauthorized deductions. Issues to do with welfare, occupational health and safety are concerns pertaining to accommodation, long working hours and workplace hazards. The latter includes work-related injuries and accidents as well as physical/sexual abuse (as encountered by FDWs).

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/act.html> (Penal Code, Cap. 224, Section 73).

<sup>6</sup> Personal email communication, October 18, 2005.



One example of non-payment that has reached public attention is the case of 400 Indian workers last year who protested peacefully to claim 4 to 6 months wages owed by their employer (a construction company). None of the 400 workers had been paid any wages for this length of time (see [www.asianlabour.org/archives/002240.php](http://www.asianlabour.org/archives/002240.php), July 20, 2004).

Non-payment of wages is also experienced by FDWs (see Table 2).

**Table 2 – Cases of non-payment of wages lodged by domestic helpers with the MOM**

2001	-	137
2002	-	189
2003	-	214
2004	-	262

(Source: Sim Chi Yin, 23 January 2005, *New Paper*, page 4)

A study of Thai workers conducted in the mid-90s listed the following major problems from the viewpoint of the workers: 1. health, 2. money related (debts incurred) 3. labour law and status of illegal worker, 4. problems related to civil and criminal laws and law enforcement (Prompiam 1996). Since then, however, the Singaporean government has made improvements to tackle the problem of illegal employment as well as to improve the safety situation of construction workers. The latter might explain the downward trend in the statistics on fatal accidents (see Table 3).

**Table 3 – Total number of industrial accidents, all industries**  
(includes shipbuilding and repair, construction and factories)

1998	-	4,247; 91 fatal
1999	-	3,953; 69 fatal
2000	-	3,519; 74 fatal
2001	-	3,790; 52 fatal
2002	-	3,388; 64 fatal
2003	-	3,179; 55 fatal

(Source: MOM 2005)

The Flor Contemplacion case triggered some awareness of the FDWs' situation in general and of Filipinas in particular. More recently, Indonesian domestic workers have been in the spotlight as a result of reported cases of suicides, fatal accidents, murder and various types of abuse involving their employers and their employers' children. Between 1999 and 2004, 114 Indonesian domestic helpers died (due to accident or suicide) in Singapore, and there were five cases of murder (employer killed by the maid) during the same period (Wisnuwardani et al. 2005). These incidents point to the serious psychological and other problems some FDWs

encounter which are not always directly related to the actual employment situation in Singapore. But these have not been investigated in-depth.

Employment-specific problems that all FDWs are subjected to include: 1. non-coverage by Employment Act (explicit exclusion of “domestic servants”); 2. control through levy and security bond; 3. orientation programs where they are told to be submissive, obedient, not to follow their religious practices and where they were not given information on rights or channels of recourse (Wisnuwardani et al. 2005); 4. no uniform contracts, no uniform wage across all nationality groups, no uniform rules on days off or working hours which results in an ethnic hierarchy among domestic workers with Filipinas usually getting the most preferential treatment.

Unfair dismissal appears to be not uncommon also. There are, e.g. cases of Indonesian domestic workers being dumped on the nearby island of Batam by their employers without having received their wages (interview with HOME, June 2005). It seems as if FDWs’ employment may be terminated any time without notice and they are not permitted to use the proceedings under the Employment Act for making salary claims. Until recently (February 2005), they had no right to a regular pay day. Partly related to the security bond imposed by the government, domestic maids are often locked up in the apartments of their employers, have their passports taken away and live in total isolation which has a negative impact on their psychological welfare.

Many of MOM’s new policies are directed at immigration status and some measures have been implemented to tackle the problem of non-payment of wages. According to a local newspaper, however, current penalties for errant employers are too light, and no employer has been jailed for not paying up (The New Paper, “Jail and cane them...says one union leader”, July 20, 2004). Since then, several employers of FDWs have been prosecuted successfully by the MOM. At least one employer had to pay a fine and serve a default sentence of six weeks in jail (communication with SNTUC, 7 September, 18 October, and 2 November 2005).

Marriage with a local or permanent resident of Singapore is not permitted for any unskilled or semi-skilled foreign worker. From the Singaporean viewpoint, this is meant to avoid social problems. From the migrants’ perspective, this might be a source of problems but little is known about this group of migrants’ social (and intimate) life while in Singapore.

There are no bilateral or multilateral labour and social security agreements between Singapore and the sending countries of its foreign workforce.

### **3. Migrant Labour Organizations**

The organizations in this section are understood as referring to collectives of/organizations run by migrant workers themselves as opposed to NGOs set up by Singaporeans.

There are strict rules governing the formal registration of NGOs and the state takes a strong interventionist stance. All registered organizations are expressly prohibited from engaging in “political activity”. In addition, foreign-based NGOs find it difficult to become formally registered in Singapore, and without registration they cannot operate locally. This explains the

very small presence of international NGOs. Because of the strict regulatory rules of the government, it is sometimes not quite clear whether an organization has formal NGO status or not.

Formal organizations run by migrant workers do not exist. The Societies Act as such does not prohibit non-citizens from forming organizations – and in fact many expatriates have set up groups (like the American Club). Prompam (1996) also writes that the setting up of such an organization is generally speaking not against Singaporean law, however organizing among workers is illegal. Any group that intends to advocate issues of rights has to go through a lengthy registration process and it is presumed that citizenship would be an issue. The case of the women’s organization AWARE provides an example: when it was registered, foreign citizens could only become associate members without the right to vote at AGMs or to hold office. Any entirely non-citizen group attempting to register a rights-based organization is unheard of – this could be a good test case for the future.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.1 Nature of Migrant Organizations

The few ‘organizations’ identified as relevant for this section can be classified as: 1. training centres, 2. informal networks.

#### Training Centres

##### *Bayanihan Centre*

The Bayanihan Centre is the second of its kind run by the Filipino Overseas Workers Association (the first is in Hong Kong). It was first mooted in 1998 and officially opened by President Arroyo in 2001 as a training/enrichment centre for FDWs. It is currently located on a former primary school compound and has ample facilities with proper computer labs. The monthly rental is half funded by the Philippine government with the equal share being provided by the Singapore government. The day-to-day operations and programmes are mainly supervised by the Philippine Embassy in Singapore.

The Philippine Bayanihan Society, comprised of Filipino and Singaporean professionals, is active in fund raising for the running of this centre.

##### *Other*

There is also the ‘Go Forth’ training centre, located in Lucky Plaza, as well as the ‘Holy Family’ (church-based in the East of Singapore) which offer training courses to Filipino domestic workers.

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<sup>7</sup> This paragraph’s content is based on personal communication with Dr. Lenore Lyons, University of Wollongong (July 11, 2005).

## *Indonesian Embassy*

The Embassy runs courses free of charge once a month (every third Sunday) on its premises for Indonesian FDWs. These revolve around language training (English, Mandarin), religious guidance, and skill enhancement sessions such as sewing. About 200 to 300 maids normally turn up for the English and Chinese language classes, religious lectures and the occasional talk by maid agencies on how to work and communicate better with their employers. The Embassy also provides a temporary shelter for Indonesian domestic workers who encounter serious problems such as salary disputes or physical/sexual abuse.

## Informal network

### *Indo Family*

There is in fact one informal network run on a volunteer basis by Indonesian domestic maids for fellow domestic helpers in Singapore, a helpline called *Indo Family*. This was started by Nurifah Rasidi, a domestic worker herself who has been working in Singapore for eight years (by the year 2005). She is currently assisted by eight other maids who attend to the problems of newly arrived compatriots by ‘counseling’ them via their hand-phones or by paying a visit to the domestic helper in need during their spare time.

The type of questions they are asked by newly arrived Indonesians usually pertain to communication problems they have with their Singaporean employers. In a newspaper article, Nurifah Rasidi is quoted as saying that during the last two years, she listened to 180 maids who have had to endure everything from beatings to deprivation of food, salary and human contact. The root cause of many problems is the language barrier, with the FDWs not understanding instructions and employers getting frustrated and angry.

## 3.2 Programs and Services

The informal network of Indo Family assists with the everyday problems newly arrived domestic workers from Indonesia encounter, helps them settle into their jobs and eases communication problems with employers by translating or mediating between them. Considering that Indonesians make up the largest number of FDWs in Singapore, it is unclear whether the relatively low number of cases (180) this network received during the last two years is an indication of their network not being widely known among Indonesians or there simply not being more ‘problem cases’.

The training courses set up by the Filipinos for their compatriots seem to be aimed at improving domestic workers’ skill levels in preparation for their return rather than at addressing problems in Singapore *per se*, whereas the Indonesian embassy’s is more directed at making life in Singapore easier (language skills) and offering a venue for socializing.

All of these initiatives serve to create a sense of ‘community’ and social space for their ‘clients’ who are all FDWs. There are no migrant organizations serving migrants in other sectors.

#### **4. NGO Involvement in Migrant Labour**

##### 4.1 Key Migrant NGOs in the Country

The existing groups (NGOs set up by Singaporeans) can be clustered in three groupings: 1. faith-based; 2. training centres; 3. shelters/counseling; 4. advocacy NGOs.

##### Faith-based organisations

##### *Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Itinerant People (ACMI)*

Instigated by a Filipino priest, the Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore established the Commission for Migrants & Itinerant People (ACMI) in 1998 with the aim of reaching out to migrant workers/students/travelers and providing support for them. It is a registered Volunteer Hosting Organization (VHO) with the National Volunteers and Philanthropy Center (NVPC). In the beginning it operated with the assistance of volunteers, among them domestic workers themselves. Since 2000, there have been two full time staff, one of them a Filipina.

From the beginning the ACMI has worked with the MOM to run workshops for employers on how to establish a harmonious working relationships with FDWs. Other activities include skills training/enrichment courses, free takeaway meals, 24-hour hotline/counseling, shelter. The ACMI has also been active in fund raising activities to assist migrant workers diagnosed with cancer or injured in workplace accidents (source: SNTUC leaflet).

The ACMI collaborated with the Community Development Council (CDC) and Heartware Network (youth NGO) to jointly organize a “Best Employer of a Foreign Domestic Helper Contest” in 2001. The awards presented by the Minister of State/Law and Home Affairs served to remind both local employers and migrant workers about the importance of harmonious working relations and the contribution to Singapore’s development and growth of migrant workers (source: SNTUC leaflet).

With the support of the Catholic Lawyers Guild the ACMI receives legal assistance on a pro bono basis for its cases. No information was available on how many cases have been dealt with so far and the nature of these cases.

The ACMI runs the Madonna Grotto, a crisis home, to house migrants in need of abode for an interim period. The activities at the Grotto include bible study, rosary recitation, helping at the soup kitchen and preparing other foods. One respondent (personal interview, June 2005), however, mentioned that the shelter run by the ACMI has been closed down.

In May 2003, the Hope Haven was launched. It is a counseling service for migrant workers with outreach helpdesks at Lucky Plaza and Little India. These desks are manned by volunteers every Sunday.

#### *An-Nisa (Sultan Mosque)*

An-Nisa was started in 2000 by the Women's Committee of the Sultan Mosque as a support group mainly for Indonesian FDWs. They have facilities for gathering and provide religious classes, skills workshops (English, flower arrangement and handicraft lessons). These classes take place every second and fourth Sunday of the month and are said to attract about 600 maids. Embassy staff members have been invited to jointly celebrate Hari Raya Puasa and have in turn offered support in organizing future activities. An-Nisa has participated in fun fairs (selling handicrafts made by FDWs) organized by the Indonesian Embassy in conjunction with Indonesia's Independence Day and Singapore's National Day.

#### *Madonna/Laksetha Skills Centers*

These Livelihood Skills centers cater to FDWs of various nationalities. At the Madonna Center, domestic workers can learn basic computer training, cooking, hairstyling, dressmaking and tailoring, English language, nursing aide/care-giver and music playing.

The Laksetha Skills center is managed by members of the Sri Lankan Catholic Community but invites FDWs from different countries to take part in similar courses as offered by the Madonna Center. Volunteer teachers include Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans.

Together the two centers are said to provide livelihood skills training for more than 200 students a year.

#### *Marymount Convent./Novena Skills Training Centre*

This centre is run by the Good Shepherds Sisters. It started out as a fairly large centre but has begun to phase out its services.

#### *Franciscan Missionaries of Mary Convent*

This Franciscan Missionaries of set up a training centre called FILODEP for Filipino FDWs.

#### *St. Francis Worker's Centre*

The present set up of the SFWC started in 2000. It serves the needs of workers, especially migrant workers, in the Jurong area. The objective is to assist mainly industrial workers (both

local and foreign) with finding solutions for their work-related problems (non-payment of salary, industrial accidents, claims of workmen compensations, living in dormitories, budget and saving schemes) by helping them understand the labour laws, and the use the official channels and mechanisms available (i.e. the MOM complaints and claims departments). It also provides space for the workers to gather, share their problems, celebrate cultural events etc. The staff consists of (unpaid) volunteers.

They provide specific programs, for example, for workers to overcome alcoholic addiction, programs on budget and saving schemes, and awareness raising about labour laws to claim wages, overtime and compensation for accidents. They are especially frequented by Thai and Indian workers. Counseling is also provided as well as assistance with email communication.

The Centre has contact with individuals in the Catholic Migrant Commission, HOME and TWC2 as well as individual contact with the chairperson of SNTUC's Migrant Worker Forum. But there are no joint activities or programmes in any formal manner with any of the above.

This Centre is a member of MFA (Migrant Forum in Asia), an Asian-wide network of migrant worker organizations that holds regular meetings.

#### *Muslim Converts Association*

This association also runs a programme from the Sultan Mosque which is coordinated by an Indonesian woman who is married to a Singaporean.

#### Shelter/counseling

#### *HOME*

After several years of being the first chairperson of the ACMI, Ms. Bridget Lew left the Commission to launch a new migrant centre known as the HOME (Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics) in December 2004. HOME runs two shelters, one for men and one for women. She is assisted by two social workers.

Ms. Lew continues her good working relationship with the MOM in solving individual cases and trying to influence MOM's policies by lobbying for changes in the system.

HOME has partnered with the MOM and SNTUC's Migrant Workers Forum in providing counseling, assistance and hardship grants to needy migrant workers in Singapore affected by the recent tsunami disaster. According to Ms. Lew, this was the only real collaboration she has had with SNTUC.

## Advocacy

### *TWC2*

The Working Committee 2 (TWC2) emerged in late 2002. It grew out of the women's organization AWARE, Singapore's main feminist organization. Unlike other NGOs, the TWC2 was not formally registered through the Societies Act. It was formed as an ad-hoc group with a one-year life-span to "promote respect for domestic workers through education and secure better treatment of domestic workers through legislation". It consists of society activists, lawyers, lecturers and students formed to raise awareness of FDW issues through public education and advocacy for more structured support. They launched two major campaigns: "Dignity Overdue" and "Sunday Off".

TWC2 focused on three main topics: 1. reducing demand for (and dependency on) FDWs; 2. providing standardized employment contracts; 3. improving the treatment of FDWs by their employers. Their activities were aimed at (1) drawing attention to the gendered division of labour within the home and finding alternative solutions to Singapore's reliance on the labour of domestic workers; and (2) addressing the abuse of FDWs.

In the past, TWC2 had conducted public forums and private dialogues with key stakeholders in exploring possible initiatives to further safeguard the interests of FDWs in Singapore. The TWC2 collaborated with the ACMI to organize an "Out of Love" charity concert as part of fund raising efforts for a shelter to house migrant workers who may be in distress.

Their activities further involve: 1. conducting of research; collection of information; 2. dialogue with stakeholders; 3. information campaign; 4. community involvement; 5) contribution to governance – government bodies; trade unions; embassies; other NGOs (such as the ACMI); accreditation bodies (AEAS and CaseTrust); 6) documentation.

Their overall aim is to promote respect for domestic workers through education, and secure better treatment through legislation and other means.

The follow-up to this one-year ad hoc initiative is the new TWC2 (the acronym now means *Transient Workers Count 2*) which is finally legally registered as a society. In addition to domestic workers, it intends to concern itself with the welfare of transient workers in general in Singapore (such as e.g. construction workers). What TWC2's concrete projects/programmes are going to be, is yet to be seen.

### *Think Centre*

The Think Centre describes itself as an "independent multi-partisan political non-governmental organization" which was first registered as a business (RCB) in July 1999 and has been registered as a society since October 2001 (under ROS). It aims to critically examine issues related to political development, democracy, rule of law, human rights and civil society. It tries to promote awareness about human rights in general. The Centre's activities include research,



publishing, organising events and networking. It engages in lawful lobbying activities such as organizing forums, turning up at ministerial dialogues and letter-writing campaigns by email. The president has also been working on migrant worker related rights issues and taken up consulting and training projects for regional NGOs related to migrant workers and human rights issues.

They have 30 members, a website, but no funding for office space.

## Other

### *UNIFEM Singapore*

UNIFEM runs a Migrant Worker Project aimed at helping Filipino domestic workers in Singapore plan for a successful return home. Currently most domestic workers spend the best part of their lives working overseas only to return home to the same poverty they left, with no plans or money for their future.

This is the angle UNIFEM tries to address by running several training courses for migrant workers, or rather modules making up one course, namely: 1. Managing Family Issues Training, 2. Personal Budgeting and Saving Training, 3. Entrepreneurship Training. A fourth module consists of a one-day briefing by the Philippine OWWA (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration), the taking of which is a requirement by OWWA regulations for completing the overall course.

UNIFEM collaborates with the Center for Overseas Workers in Manila in running an economic reintegration program in the Philippines.

## 4.2 Nature of Programs and Services

Most of the programs and services of existing NGOs or community groups are directed at FDWs – especially the training centres but also the advocacy group TWC2 which is not surprising as the TWC2 is rooted in the women’s movement and thus focuses on women issues. The new TWC2 claims to include male migrant workers, but so far no concrete action has been taken yet. The training centres also all focus on domestic workers. The only general human rights NGO in Singapore, the Think Centre, is concerned with all types of migrant workers.

Purely foreign-run initiatives exist to date only in form of an informal network (Indo Family). Other NGOs do involve foreigners – either former migrant workers themselves or expat compatriots who help out on a volunteer basis. Most existing NGO/community groups, however, focus on foreign domestic workers. The Filipino community and embassy became active sooner than their Indonesian counterparts, but the latter have also become more involved.

## 5. Trade Union Involvement in Migrant Labour

### 5.1 Main Trade Union Groups

The bulk of the unions in Singapore have joined a labour union federation, the SNTUC. In 1979, 94.7 percent of union members were affiliated with SNTUC which grew to 96.8 percent in 1984 and 98 percent in 1986 (Sing 2002:21). The vast majority of unions (69 of the 72 registered unions) today are affiliated with SNTUC. There are also three independent trade unions (Air Line Pilots, Transport-Vessels, Film Industrial Employees). About 16% of the entire workforce (338,311 in 2002) is unionized (Labor Rights Report, n.d.).

The number of overall employee trade unions has fallen during the last decade (from 83 to 71) (see Table 4), despite a rise in membership (around 121,000 or an increase of 35.8 %). Sixty-five of all trade unions are under the SNTUC.

**Table 4 – Employee’s Trade Unions by Size of Trade Union, 1991 & 2001**

Size of Trade Union (Number of Members)	1991	2001	Change (%)
Total	83	71	- 14.46
Under 50	2	-	- 100.0
50 – 249	12	8	- 33.33
250 – 999	30	20	- 33.33
1,000-4,999	27	25	- 7.40
5,000-9,999	7	6	- 14.28
10,000 and Over	5	12	+ 140.0

(Source: Frost and Chiu, 2003: 31).

When looking at trade union membership across sectors, all sectors have witnessed growth, many of them significant (especially construction).

SNTUC’s main concern is the welfare of all workers, including migrants. In a recent background paper (SNTUC 2005), it stated that “the labour movement has always recognized and accepted the need for migrant workers to supplement/complement our limited human resources, and appreciate their contribution to Singapore’s development and growth”.

Migrant workers can join trade unions in Singapore. The overall non-Singaporean/foreign membership is about 17.5% or 74,000 foreign workers of the 500,000 work permit holders. The KFEU (Keppel Shipyard union) has the highest percentage of foreigners at about 70%, followed by the SSEU (Sembawang shipyard union) at about 50%. The UWEEI (electronic/electrical sector union) is one of the largest unions in Singapore and has an about 40% foreign membership, most of whom are likely to be Malaysians as this sector is dominated by Malaysian

foreign workers. BATU's (Building, Construction and Timber Industries Employees Union) overall membership is 22,000 of which 20% are migrant workers.

It is possible for migrant workers to be appointed as liaisons or representatives at the branch level. According to *The StraitsTimes* (8 March 2004), only 2% of union leaders in Singapore are foreigners – and presumably Malaysian but no exact information could be found.

### 5.2 Union Services to Migrant Labour

The trade union movement sees its role as working in partnership with employers and the government. They are also heavily involved in social, educational and recreational activities. As members, migrant workers are said to enjoy the same union protection, services and union benefits as local members (although not those extended to local workers' families). The construction union BATU settles any disputes on a group basis including those foreigners who are members. In some cases, subscription fees for foreign workers are subsidized by their employers to enable them to become members.

Migrant workers in Singapore have the opportunity to upgrade their skills and to acquire formal certification of competency in a trade. Employers are encouraged to offer skill improvement to their foreign workers as the levy is lower the higher the skill level of the individual foreign worker is. According to the SNTUC, in 2002-03, about 9,000 migrant workers (on work permits) had benefited from the Basic Education for Skills Training (BEST) and Work Improvement through Secondary Education (WISE) programmed administered by the union (SNTUC Background Paper, 2005). Rahman and Fee (2005) report in their study on Bangladeshi workers that "a significant number of migrants had upgraded their skills over time" (p. 73), leaving 52% of migrants unskilled at the time of the interview. These opportunities, however, are only available to workers in certain sectors, such as construction.

According to a recent questionnaire which the ILO sent out to trade unions around the world (to which 42 trade unions responded, among them SNTUC), 16 unions replied affirmatively to the question of whether they have a designated migration officer. Two of these unions are in Southeast Asia: Hong Kong's CTU and SNTUC. The main responsibilities of such migration officers were mostly (1) training and information, followed by (2) policy advocacy, (3) individual assistance and lastly (4) recruitment of members. SNTUC's designated migration officer is part of the 'Migrant Workers Forum' (MWF) which was set up in 2002 and chaired by Mr. Yeo Guat Kwang. The MWF consists of nine unions with the key leaders involved.

One of the tasks the MWF is involved in is the organization of social events. During the May Day celebration, one day is now earmarked for foreign workers. This year's May Day Outing for Foreign Workers (2005) was attended by ca.10,000 migrants.

There are ad hoc, one-off initiatives in times of a specific 'crisis' or event. SNTUC's supermarket chain, Fairprice, for instance donated food to the Indian workers who were stranded after their company collapsed and did not pay their wages.

### 5.3 Union Cooperation with NGOs

The NGOs/community-based organisations stated that there is no true working relationship between them and SNTUC apart from ad hoc, one-off activities as e.g. in the case of post-Tsunami relief work. There are no concrete projects or programmes both types of organizations collaborate on. This might partly have to do with SNTUC being reluctant to get involved in domestic worker issues and many NGOs being concerned with exactly this group of migrants.

The more policy- and advocacy oriented NGOs have a very good relationship with MOM in the form of regular dialogue. Those involved in service provision tend to take their cases to the MOM instead of SNTUC. In fact, the MOM is seen as truly trying its best to solve many of the migrant worker related problems, with dedicated staff. By contrast, NGOs lament that the SNTUC's Migrant Workers Forum is not active and not visible enough. But this is partly related to SNTUC serving a different constituency of workers. NGOs also think that there is very little concrete targeting of employers and that penalties for errant employers are too light.

SNTUC's MWF highlighted its cooperation with one specific NGO which has a similar working style/method. It also claims to have offered NGOs to submit concrete proposals for projects/programmes to the MWF, but to date none of the existing NGOs have come forward.

### 5.4 Trends and Developments: Union Policy Advocacies and Stance

The setting up of a Migrant Worker Forum at SNTUC constitutes an important new development with regard to union's involvement in migrant worker issues.

Migrant workers who are members are supposedly treated the same as local workers. More recently, the chairman of the MWF has released a statement about the need to do more to raise awareness amongst migrants on their rights (Yeo, 2005). This statement was made in connection with the official endorsement of ILO's Plan of Action 2004.

But to other stakeholders (NGOs/CBOs), the role and strategy of the MWF is not clear. When it comes to the mediation process, the MOM is seen by NGOs as trying to solve the dispute of non-payment of salary of migrant workers but SNTUC seems rather silent in this regard. According to SNTUC, this however is not correct. With regard to workers in the sectors they represent, they fight as much for migrants' wage payments (for instance when a company goes bankrupt) as they do for nationals. But such cases are not publicized and hence not publicly known.

## 6. Cooperation or Competition?: Dynamics of Migrant Labour Work

### 6.1 Strengths and Weaknesses/Gaps of Existing Migrant Labour Work

#### *NGOs*

The main weakness of NGOs and CBOs is that they tend to be small with little if any regular budgets. Few have full time staff. Except for the SFWC, they do not engage in transnational networking across the region or with NGOs based in the sending countries (the 'new' TWC2, however, is planning to do so). This is partly related to the problem of having very limited resources available.

There is in fact no NGO/CBO specifically assisting those types of migrants comprised of male workers due to their type of job (i.e. who do not work as domestic helpers). For some there were no services at all until fairly recently. One of the recommendations by Prompiam (1996), for instance, was that there should be an organization to assist Thai workers in Singapore. This was in the late 1990s. Since then, however, the SFWC has taken up this issue of assisting migrant workers. Unlike in Hong Kong, there is no foreign worker led-NGO (such as a Filipino NGO led by Filipino activists), apart from the informal network, *Indo Family*.

The NGOs' advantage, on the other hand, is that they organize public fora/events and bring issues to the attention of the public and policy makers. This has given some of the impetus to make the MOM and SNTUC take some positive action for the protection of migrant workers. In addition, the service oriented/para-legal NGOs fill an important gap by focusing on FDWs for whom there would otherwise be no non-governmental channels. The grassroots based groups have a crucial role in channeling cases to MOM which would otherwise never have come to MOM's attention as FDWs and other migrants do not usually approach MOM by themselves. The training centres also fill an important gap as male migrant workers can get training through SNTUC but for FDWs, there would otherwise be no such service. Although how effective the actual training is and how useful it really is to returning FDWs are yet to be tested, the courses most certainly serve at least a social welfare role as a forum for FDWs to meet peers.

#### *Trade Union*

ICFTU-APRO's most recent (2003) Action Plan regarding migrant worker issues recommends the establishment of a migrant workers' desk or committee which SNTUC has fulfilled. However, migrant workers themselves have no representatives on board. Unions are also supposed to engage in the active recruitment of migrant workers as union members. In Singapore, recruitment of foreign workers as members seems to concentrate on those working for big companies in the shipping and construction industries, but excludes workers in smaller enterprises and in certain sectors, such as domestic work. The active recruitment of members seems to be low on the priority list of SNTUC's MWF – which is quite consistent with many other trade unions according to a recent ILO survey (Johansson 2005). There seems to be scope for more action on this issue, in Singapore as elsewhere.

One area in which SNTUC (with MOM) has made major improvements is the housing and occupational safety situation of migrant workers, mostly in the construction sector.

However, SNTUC does not have any concrete projects or programmes for FDWs other than being involved with MOM's training for employers. Also, male migrants can acquire skills, but for FDWs there is no such skill acquisition programme offered by the SNTUC. Separate training centres and UNIFEM take care of this on a relatively small scale, and this is an area where trade union involvement would be beneficial.

According to ILO recommendations in 1999, trade unions in receiving countries are encouraged to:

- negotiate for internationally accepted standard employment contracts;
- make representation for the reduction of fees charged to migrants in view of the complete abolition of recruitment fees.

These two points are not tackled by SNTUC. Recruitment is an area the MWF does not engage with.

#### *Cooperation or competition?*

NGOs have no sense of competition at this moment in time and would rather encourage trade unions to get more involved. They feel that unions should lobby for changes in employment law and working conditions and should be more active in lobbying for standard contracts. Unlike SNTUC, NGOs argue that maids are not in the position to negotiate a fair contract for themselves. SNTUC has the resources and connections to do more. They could set up a database on violations and abuses, injuries and breach of contracts to really find out what the scale of the problems is. As it stands, the nature of household work is not understood by the SNTUC.

Based on trade unions' larger pool of resources, NGOs also argue that SNTUC should offer free legal services. They should have a general welfare fund and legal services for all migrant workers. If they were to offer proper services to migrant workers, they could justify charging a fee (membership fee). Likewise, whether the levy payments could be used to fund such services should be explored.

There is a feeling among the NGO/CBO community that the Migrant Worker Forum was purely set up to create a forum in which questions from the media can be addressed and thus, this would manage and control the sudden interest in FDW and other foreign worker issues.

The SNTUC on the other hand seems to be hesitant in seeking more collaboration with certain NGOs based on their different methods of operation. This lack of exchange between the two types of organizations seems to be at the root of NGOs' non-understanding of SNTUC's workings. There is no trust between NGOs and SNTUC (which is a mutual problem). This, however, would be the basis for cooperation/collaboration.

To sum up: NGOs are more grassroots oriented and thus ideal for dealing with concrete cases, whereas trade unions are part of the overall labour movement and thus, are mass organizations. SNTUC has a huge political network and large financial as well as human resources. If trust were built up, the SNTUC's MWF could function as the focal point of a national as well as regional network inclusive of Singapore based NGOs.

## 6.2 Models and New Trends in Migrant Work (in-country)

NGO engagement in migrant worker issues in Singapore seems to follow a similar model as elsewhere in that there are 1. groups catering to one specific type of migrant worker; and 2. groups focusing exclusively on domestic workers. There are, however, no NGOs (apart from the informal network by Indonesians) catering exclusively to one nationality group. Unique to Singapore (in its role as a receiving country) seems to be the fairly large number of kill training centres for FDWs.

The trend now seems to be for migrants themselves to get more involved in the service provision for their compatriots. However, there are no signs yet of the setting up of a formal group or a migrant worker advocacy group but this might not be too far off.

Some advocacy groups are also finally thinking about engaging with transnational/ regional networks. Cooperation with counterparts in the sending countries is still underdeveloped. In this regard, Singapore-based NGOs are behind NGO activities elsewhere in this region.

SNTUC, together with Hong Kong, is unique in Southeast Asia for having set up a Migrant Workers Forum. This is a laudable development. But to be more effective and engaged with pressing issues from the perspective of the workers (and not employers), more resources need to be allocated. This might also be an issue of political will.

## 6.3 Models and New Trends in Migrant Work (cross border/international)

SNTUC has links with the Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA). It is hosting the occasional visits of MFA representatives and is gradually getting more involved in regional activities with the assistance of MFA (such as meeting with counterparts and NGOs in the sending countries).

As member of ICFTU-APRO, SNTUC takes part in regional meetings and there have been a number focusing on migrant worker issues. There is, however, no concrete cooperation/collaboration taking place with trade unions in sending countries. This is apparently because of the multiplicity of unions. There are too many, a fact which renders the identification of a suitable and trustworthy counterpart in the sending countries very difficult. In countries like Indonesia, since the fall of Suharto, there has been a mushrooming of union activity without a national centre (or too many unions claiming to be national centres). The political situation in many sending countries is volatile and unions (being politically affiliated with different parties) are affected by this. Resources are limited for any trade union, but the resources in the origin

countries are even lower (personal interviews with SNTUC and ICFTU-APRO, June 2005). Considering this situation, outside assistance by ILO and/or ICFTU is needed to help trade unions identify suitable partners – provided the political will was there.

No Singapore based NGO has any sustained, regular cross-border links. In this regard, Singaporean based NGOs do not follow trends elsewhere of being part of transnational networks.

#### 6.4 Role of International Instruments and Platforms

The major limitations of existing ILO Conventions is that no country in the Asia Pacific has ratified them except for New Zealand and Malaysia/Sabah which have both ratified Convention no. 97. Also, the content of these conventions reflects the traditional situation of a male dominated migration system. To overcome the impasse of ILO intervention when Conventions are not applicable, the procedure of “pattern or practice studies” was adopted by the ILO Governing Body in 1997. It is a procedure which trade unions might resort to when other venues are not available (ILO 1999). To date, no such practice studies have been conducted in the specific area of labour migration for the Asia Pacific region.

A recent study on the obstacles to the ratification of the 1990 UN Convention (Piper and Iredale 2003) has shown the various problem areas which make ratification by the Singapore government extremely unlikely.

The only regional platform that the SNTUC takes part in is ICFTU-APRO. At the ASEAN level, an attempt was made to obtain formal recognition of the ACTUC (ASEAN Trade Union council, comprised of ICFTU affiliates and non-affiliates), but without success so far.



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