



Think Centre's concerns on distressed migrant workers during the pandemic

Think Centre expresses concern over the recent spate of incidents involving distressed migrant workers residing in purpose-built-dormitories.

Migrant workers are undeniably one of the biggest groups affected by the COVID-19 since it broke out among the dormitories in early April. Early control measures involved the massive shifting of many workers out of their dormitories to other government-designated accommodations over the past few months. Despite the government's efforts, hundreds of cases are still confirmed among migrant workers on a daily basis.

The four recent reported instances of migrant workers who endangered their own lives, and in one case who was found dead, is an alarm that the authorities should heed and respond to accordingly.

Recent news reports have highlighted concerns over mental fatigue among the general public due to the extension of preventive measures and restrictions in place. The fact that migrant workers face more restrictions than the general public through no fault of their own cannot be neglected. Even those not in quarantine are isolated in the confined space and conditions of dormitories in perpetual "Stay Home Notice". They are also expected to adhere to a stricter control regime tied with punitive consequences in case of compliance failure.

Many of them still live in crowded conditions, face prolonged uncertainty over employment and income, risk of infection, it would be inevitable that their mental health would suffer. Furthermore, current conditions also risk exacerbating pre-existing health issues, disability and disease among these workers.

Even with regular communication, migrant worker's limited ability to help their families thousands of miles away heightens risks of anxiety and depression among them.

Over a hundred thousand workers live in purpose-built-dormitories and temporary ones managed by the Ministry of Manpower through outsourced private management firms, and to an extent, many thousands also live in other irregular dormitories such as converted factories and not directly under the regular survey of the Ministry. Among these large numbers, there will be a percentage that will be even more vulnerable. The four reported cases may be just the tip of the iceberg due to the sheer numbers of migrant workers affected. It should be the priority to identify and provide timely access to adequate mental and medical healthcare to these workers most at risk.

Think Centre reminds the government that Singapore is a signatory to the recent ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers which obliges Singapore as a Receiving State to "protect the fundamental human rights, promote the welfare and uphold the human dignity of migrant workers through appropriate measures that ensure fair treatment towards migrant workers and prevent abuses, exploitation and violence towards them" (Article 30).

We also call on the government to take into consideration the 14 May 2020 Joint Statement of the ASEAN Labour Ministers Meeting on Response to the impact of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) on Labour and Employment, specifically to "facilitate access of all workers infected by COVID-19 to essential health care services and other relevant medical support as necessary and prevent discrimination against infected workers; (Article 3)

Provide appropriate assistance and support to ASEAN migrant workers affected by the pandemic in each others country or in third countries, including effective implementation of the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers, working towards their health, well-being and safety as well as facilitating their movement and reuniting them with their families" (Article 4).

We urge the government to:

1. Adopt more active surveying of migrant workers under stress especially those residing or restricted to the dormitories. The number of dormitories involved means stakeholders should be brought into the effort which includes the migrant workers' organisations, migrant oriented services offered by faith-based organisations, professional counselling services, and where necessary language interpretation services;
2. Work with the consulates and embassies of the main sending States to develop a just and safe repatriation response plan to address stranded migrant workers in distress who expressly wish to return to the country of their origins;
3. Convene a standing working group for the duration of the pandemic involving civil society organisations, trade unions, employers to pre-emptively address the pandemic driven issues of non-payment of salaries by employers, broaden social protection of migrant workers to mitigate disruptions such as sudden loss of job/income, and to promote and protect their physical and mental wellbeing both at places of work and rest;
4. Enforce decent conditions for both local and migrant workers ensuring better social protection and support measures, with good working conditions, to help mitigate the mental health effects during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.
5. Ensure migrant workers must be treated fairly, without discrimination, during and after COVID-19 pandemic, especially for access to healthcare including mental healthcare.

Think Centre appreciates the effort of all who have contributed to ensuring society handles the current crises without leaving anyone behind. We hope that this also means promoting people to people solidarity and to reassess what we consider to be basic, fair and decent working and living conditions that need to be met for workers and society to survive and thrive.