



The Good Fight

BY MELINDA MURPHY

Not paid for years. Locked in your home for months. Forced to have sex with your employer. These are the issues millions of Foreign Domestic Workers face in Asia, including many right here in Singapore.

Maria's* nightmare started with her employer forcing her to have sex whenever he felt like it. He'd come into her room, lock the door and rape her. Then, another family member started doing the same thing. Then another. Before long, Maria was trapped in a life of horrifying sexual abuse. Imagine how hard it'd be to leave as a Foreign Domestic Worker (FDW) in Singapore when your employer holds your work visa and all your money.

Eventually, Maria did escape to a local NGO called Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME). Her employer was found guilty on criminal charges and she was paid \$7,000, mostly for outstanding salaries, but the damages did nothing to address her suffering. Worse yet, she had to return to the Philippines as nobody here would hire her – yet another indignity.

* Names have been changed

Sadly, this type of story is not uncommon, though the circumstances are always different. Recently, the death of an Indonesian maid in Penang grabbed headlines; she reportedly died due to abuse by her employers who also withheld her salary for three years.

Most cases of mistreatment involve chronically underpaying women – even completely withholding pay – essentially locking workers into bondage. Other typical problems include work injuries, poor living conditions, and physical, verbal and psychological abuse.

Almost always, these migrant workers lack the funds and knowledge to pursue legal claims against their abusers, especially after returning to their home country.

That's where Justice Without Borders (JWB) steps in to help. This non-profit organisation with offices in Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia and, soon, the Philippines aids migrant workers in pursuing legal claims against their abusers after they've returned to their home countries.

Douglas MacLean is JWB's Executive Director and founder who began working in anti-human trafficking in 2007 before starting the organisation in 2013. "Many times, employers would find out the migrant workers were pursuing legal recourse and would send them home. Once there, these women were out

of options and their employer got off scot-free. The aim of Justice Without Borders is to change that and give these workers what they deserve.”

JWB doesn't provide legal services itself. Rather, it partners with front-line FDW service providers to connect migrant workers living in their home country with pro-bono lawyers in Singapore and Hong Kong. These lawyers then pursue their clients' claims.

“I see myself as being a voice for the otherwise voiceless and standing up for those who aren't able to stand up for themselves,” said Felicia Ong, a Senior Associate at Beacon Law Corporation who has volunteered more than 100 hours with JWB. “I do get a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment when I see these migrant workers finally receiving some semblance of justice, but often I also get something even more precious in return – their friendship.”

Partners and legal volunteers such as Felicia contributed nearly 9,000 pro bono hours in 2016, screening 165 cases and selecting 20 for further development with 30 percent of the cases receiving successful out-of-court settlements. Thirty percent may not seem like a lot, but it's actually a strong success rate as civil litigation goes – and each win means everything to these women. The average settlement is \$6,500, a fortune for a FDW. In Maria's case, her settlement was enough to pay off her debts, support her child's education and start a small business.

JWB has even had success pursuing cases that seemed hopeless. Take Rita* who returned to Indonesia nearly six years ago expecting to receive the two years of salary her employer had “held” for her, but the money never arrived and local agencies couldn't help. After five years of struggling to make ends meet and losing hope, JWB took Rita's case and secured a pro bono lawyer in Singapore who was able to win compensation for Rita. This goes to show that it's never too late to pursue just compensation.

How can you help? Donate your time or finances to Justice Without Borders. Even if you're not an attorney, there are ways for you to get involved. An hour of your time can mean the world to somebody in real need. *u*



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**Are you in need of help?
Or do you suspect abuse?**

- Foreign Domestic Worker Association for Social Support and Training (FAST) | fast.org.sg
- HealthServe | healthserve.org.sg
- Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME) | home.org.sg
- Indonesia Family Network (IFN) | facebook.com/ifn.singapore
- Justice Without Borders | forjusticewithoutborders.org
- Migrant Workers' Centre | mwc.org.sg
- Project X (for sex workers) | theprojectx.org
- Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) | twc2.org.sg