

Singapore

The Big Read: Grappling with isolation, migrant workers in dorms long for a return to the wider community

While the vast majority of the Singapore population has been experiencing many twists and turns over the past 15 months, as community restrictions get tightened or loosened in tandem with the pandemic situation, not much has changed for the 275,000-odd migrant workers living in dormitories.



A migrant worker uses his phone at a dormitory block in Toh Guan on Jul 15, 2021. (Photo: TODAY/Raj Nadarajan)



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SINGAPORE: Looking out from the window of his dormitory in Admiralty, migrant worker Hasan cannot help but feel jealous when he sees residents in the area meeting friends or going out for a breath of fresh air in the park.

Unlike them, the 28-year-old Bangladeshi has not been able to do the same for the past 15 months and counting, or since April last year when the authorities imposed strict movement curbs on foreign workers living in the dormitories to stop the rapid spread of COVID-19 among them.

During this period, Mr Hasan has also not seen his friends as they all live in different dormitories.

READ: Migrant workers from India to enter Singapore in 'calibrated manner' through pilot programme

"I can only video call and see his face but I cannot do anything from here (in the dormitory) ... This is the most frustrating thing we face until now," said Mr Hasan, who is a workplace health and safety supervisor and did not want to give his full name.

The sense of frustration was echoed by Mr Uddin Almas, a Bangladeshi worker living at Avery Lodge at 2D Jalan Papan.

The 38-year-old electrical supervisor said he longs for the day when he could once again spend his day off on Sundays to play music with his band, the Migrant Band.

"We just sing and have fun and it helps us to forget all our problems and stresses," said Mr Almas, as he reminisced about the good old days with the band.

It gets "sad and lonely" during this period of prolonged isolation, he added, and the inability for him to destress with the band has also made him dwell on how much he misses his family back home.



Mr Uddin Almas (second from right, standing) with his band, the Migrant Band, during an event more than two years ago. (Photo: Mr Uddin Almas)

With Singapore striving to transit to a "new normal", and the national vaccination exercise being ramped up in recent weeks, many people here are looking forward to further easing of pandemic-related social and economic restrictions in the coming months — even as the emergence of the KTV cluster this week presented a major setback for reopening efforts, sending a sobering reminder that the COVID-19 virus is still very much alive and kicking.

While the vast majority of the Singapore population has been experiencing many twists and turns over the past 15 months, as community restrictions get tightened or loosened in tandem with the pandemic situation, not much has changed for the 275,000-odd migrant workers living in dormitories.



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The restrictions — which continue even though COVID-19 has not been spreading its tentacles wildly across the dormitories like before — have enhanced feelings of isolation, anguish and despair among the workers, with few outlets available for them to relieve their stress, according to activists who support migrant workers here.

In August last year, all dormitories were declared clear of the coronavirus and workers gradually returned to work. At the peak of the outbreak which led Singapore to enter a two-month circuit breaker period in April — more than 1,000 new COVID-19 cases were identified in dormitories daily.

Though COVID-19 infections have since cropped up within the dormitories periodically, they have not grown into large clusters.

READ: Commentary: Some pain even as Singapore rises to the challenge of tighter COVID-19 measures

The biggest dormitory cluster detected on Apr 27 this year at Westlite Woodlands Dormitory had seven recorded cases. The Ministry of Health (MOH) closed the cluster on May 25 after no new cases linked to the cluster were found after 28 days.

The improved situation in the dormitories had led the authorities to announce last December that a pilot scheme would be introduced in the first quarter of this year to allow migrant workers in some dormitories to return to the community once a month.

However, it has been put on hold indefinitely. In response to queries, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) said on Thursday (Jul 15) that this was “to protect the health of our migrant workers, especially as more cases of COVID-19 were picked up”.

“MOM is monitoring the situation closely and will further ease the measures progressively and safely,” it said.

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‘EVERY DAY IS THE SAME’

With the migrant workers largely confined to their dormitories, those interviewed said they have been going through the same mundane routine of heading straight to their work sites each morning and returning to their living quarters in the evening.

While they typically had little time or energy for leisure after work before the pandemic struck, the big difference now is that they are unable to go out freely during their days off or weekends.

For Mr Al Amin, a dormitory worker who lives at Aspri-Westlite Papan, his typical workday starts early at 6.30am. Mr Al Amin, like those interviewed, shares a room with 10 to 18 people in the dorms.

The 27-year-old technician, who works at Shell’s petrochemical refinery in Pulau Bukom, would take the company bus and arrive at his workplace at 7.15am, where he changes into his work attire before reporting for work at 9am.



Mr Al Amin, a 27-year-old technician who works at a petrochemical refinery, in his dorm room. (Photo: Mr Al Amin)

After his work ends at 6.45pm, Mr Al Amin travels back to his dormitory at Jalan Papan by bus, arriving at around 8pm. He then eats, washes his clothes and talks to his family via video call.

The other migrant workers typically recounted the same schedules. Because of the current manpower crunch, as the economic downturn forces many companies to shed workers, some said they have had to work overtime more frequently and therefore return to the dormitories later.

Others said they have chosen to make use of the lull period to upgrade their skills by taking part-time online courses.

Sundays used to be the highlight of their week as it's usually their day off and they could go to various places to catch up with friends or do some shopping. But that is no longer possible.

"I say (it's like) jail because I do not have the freedom to go out," said Mr Al Amin, who hails from Bangladesh.

"I am very appreciative of what Singapore has done for me but I am only human to feel trapped ... I long for the freedom that other people have where they can go out and dine in".

READ: With COVID-19 border restrictions, Singapore unable to 'adequately replace' outgoing migrant workers: MOM

Echoing his comments, Mr Nilsagar, 32, a site supervisor who goes by one name, said of his plight: "Work and go dorm, work and go dorm ... this is not life".

Since August last year, the workers have been allowed to visit a recreation centre — which houses facilities such as supermarkets and food centres — thrice a week for four hours each visit, which they must book through MOM's SGWorkPass mobile application in advance. There are eight recreation centres islandwide, with the workers assigned to a fixed centre.

These visits were suspended temporarily when Singapore saw a new wave of infections and entered a state of "heightened alert" in May, said MOM. But they have since resumed when COVID-19 measures were eased on Jun 14,

are not a perfect substitute for being able to go out and eat or shop at their favourite outlets in Little India.

Also, after factoring the time taken to travel and to undergo antigen rapid testing to enter the centres, they usually are left with about one-and-a-half hours to get their errands done. This rush can itself be a source of stress, they said.

Because of this, some workers have chosen to put in more hours at work, or use their rest days to catch up on sleep, instead of applying to visit the recreation centres.

One such worker is Mr Hasan, who said that he sees no point in making the trip. Not only are his friends assigned to different centres, but it would also be difficult for them to coincide their exit time slots with one another, and so there is still little opportunity for them to meet.



Mr Hasan (second from right) with his friends from the COVID-19 Migrant Support Coalition, where he is a community leader, in a photo taken on Apr 18, 2021. (Photo: Mr Hasan)

Some workers, like Mr Al Amin, have chosen to take up part-time diploma courses to make full use of their free time. Mr Al Amin is currently six months away from completing his higher diploma in facility management in mechanical and electrical engineering.

"It is high time for me to do something like this for myself especially during this time if not my weekends will be very boring," he said.

WHAT MOM, DORM OPERATORS SAY

Explaining why the pilot to have migrant workers return to the community had been put on hold, then-Second Minister for Manpower Tan See Leng said in May that the authorities' responsibility is to "first and foremost ... protect the lives and health of all of us, migrant workers, the industry and livelihoods".



discovered.

READ: Singapore to vaccinate migrant workers against COVID-19, starting with 10,000 dormitory residents

In its response to queries, MOM said it has always been “mindful and conscious of the need to better support the mental well-being of our migrant workers”.

As such, the ministry has been working with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as the Migrant Workers’ Centre (MWC) and HealthServe, to ensure that the workers have access to mental health support and assistance, such as counselling services in the workers’ native languages and support helplines.

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MOM said among the common issues raised by the workers include family problems and concerns about the well-being of their loved ones back home.

The ministry added that MWC and HealthServe follow up closely with the workers on the issues raised, and escalate them to MOM for further action when necessary.

To aid these efforts, the ministry has also increased its frontline support by partnering with the Institute of Mental Health to train 50 medical professionals to identify and offer care to migrant workers who may require mental health interventions.

MOM has also trained personnel under its Forward Assurance and Support Teams to identify and administer psychological first aid to distressed workers.

Recently, MOM launched a Friends of Assurance, Care and Engagement (Ace) network and peer support network, where volunteer migrant workers can flag concerns raised by their peers to the relevant authorities.

“The peer support network helps to strengthen community support amongst our migrant workers, with volunteers trained in psychological first aid to provide a first layer of support to their peers who may require assistance.”



MOM said it has always been “mindful and conscious of the need to better support the mental well-being of our migrant workers”. (Photo: TODAY/Raj Nadarajan)

MOM added that its officers, counsellors who visit dormitories on a daily basis, as well as the NGOs, have also worked hard to reach out to migrant workers to listen to them and support their needs.

It cited recent polls — conducted by the Government’s feedback unit Reach between April and June — which found that about nine in 10 of more than 1,900 migrant workers residing in dormitories indicated consistently over the last three months that they had been coping well.

Several dorm operators approached declined to respond to queries or could not provide responses by publication time.

One dorm operator, who cannot be named as he is not authorised to speak to the media, said that while recreation centres and leisure activities in the dormitories had to pause due to a surge in COVID-19 cases, these facilities are gradually re-opening and activities are resuming one at a time.

However, these facilities, such as gyms and canteens, are still operating in a controlled manner, where there is a cap on the number of people who can access each area and workers would have to pre-book slots to use certain facilities.

He added that the living conditions and the type of amenities and support that are available to the workers will vary from dorm to dorm.

Most dorm operators would have feedback channels for migrant workers to flag any issues that they have, and they are also supported by NGOs and MOM to deliver counselling support and activities to keep the workers engaged and occupied.

Some dormitory operators themselves have also created online channels through mobile apps, or WhatsApp groups to run activities such as virtual bingo games and dance contests, he added.

THE MENTAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL



Some of these organisations said they have been receiving more calls relating to mental health since the pandemic started.

A spate of suicides and attempted suicides at the foreign worker dormitories also made headlines last year, with videos circulating on social media appearing to portray various incidents of foreign workers standing precariously on rooftops or ledges of dormitory buildings.

On these incidents, MOM told CNA in August last year that it would monitor the situation closely and work with NGOs to enhance its mental health support programmes for the workers, though it did not observe a spike in the number of migrant worker suicides compared to previous years.

READ: Commentary: Worries over COVID-19 situation are taking a mental toll on Singapore

The Alliance of Guest Workers Outreach (AGWO) receives at least one or two calls related to mental health issues on average each day from the migrant workers, compared to none before the pandemic started, said its chairman, Reverend Samuel Gift Stephen. AGWO is a coalition of 130 partners ranging from religious organisations to corporate companies which are passionate about migrant work.

Mr Michael Cheah, executive director of HealthServe, said it receives a monthly average of about 200 calls for support on its existing mental health hotline, with spikes observed during festive seasons or when news breaks of a crisis back in the workers' home countries.

Rev Stephen said a large part of the workers' stress stems from the lingering uncertainty over the coronavirus situation, and whether Singapore will return to another partial lockdown similar to last year — a situation which would affect their livelihoods.

READ: COVID-19 cases detected again in cleared migrant worker dorms, about 7,000 quarantined due to new infections

Their spirits had been slightly lifted last August, when some communal and leisure activities resumed in the dormitories and in the recreation centres. But things took a turn for worse again when COVID-19 cases surged in the community in April this year, and some restrictions were reintroduced.

"It was sudden ... so they were actually fearful that it would be the same as last year — a complete lockdown, with loss of income," said Rev Stephen.

"From past experience, they knew the Government would handle it well. But how soon and how quick would it be? That's the fear they had."

Ms Anthea Ong, a former Nominated Member of Parliament, said she has observed a sense of helplessness and hopelessness among the workers, especially as they see the rest of Singapore resuming many of their normal activities while they remain confined indoors.

"There are still remarks that they feel that they are incarcerated, which is very sad because obviously they have not done anything wrong... They have gone beyond doing more than right for us actually, by cooperating (with the COVID-19 measures) and doing the work needed to keep us going," said Ms Ong, who kick-started Welcome In My Backyard, a volunteer-run initiative that aims to bridge the gap between migrant workers and the rest of the Singapore community.

a distraction or an avenue to release their frustrations.

“In this situation, (when you’re) worrying about the future, about jobs, about our families ... it is more important to go outside than before,” said Mr Rubel Fazley Elahi, 31, who works as a safety coordinator.

“(When we go out) it is to refresh ourselves, chit-chat, reflect and share our problems. These things help our mental health. Even if your friend cannot solve your problems, we still feel lighter after (speaking to them),” he added.

Mr Islam Rockybul, 26, a safety coordinator on a construction project, said he has noticed that some of the 28 workers who work under him have not been able to concentrate as well as they did before the pandemic.

He recounted a recent incident where a worker told him that he felt like a “caged bird” who could no longer control his emotions.

“Most migrant workers feel stuck ... I know we came to Singapore to work but we are also human and need to destress to focus better,” said Mr Rockybul. “If workers can’t concentrate on work then how will the work end up?”



Mr Islam Rockybul, a 26-year-old safety coordinator on a construction project, in a photo taken when he went to Pulau Ubin on his day off last December. (Photo: Mr Islam Rockybul)

NGOS, VOLUNTEERS CHIP IN TO HELP REDUCE BOREDOM

To alleviate some of the boredom and provide some relief from the daily grind, some NGOs and volunteer groups have stepped in and organised virtual activities.

One such organisation is 24asia Learning Centre, which has held virtual concerts as well as free computer lessons for the migrant worker community here.

AGWO has similarly gathered a group of over 100 migrant workers who act as ambassadors for their dormitories and help identify signs of depression and suicide ideation among their compatriots.

AGWO will then help to provide counselling for the workers in distress, said Rev Stephen, as many of them are wary of seeking professional help due to fears that they would be blacklisted at work.

The COVID-19 Migrant Support Coalition (CMSC), a ground-up initiative championing migrant worker issues, has also organised various programmes and online engagement sessions to help the migrant workers feel connected to the community.

For instance, it runs a befrienders programme, WePals, where Singaporeans can connect with migrant workers and form friendships.

Acknowledging that programmes like these do not solve the “root issue”, Ms Jewel Yi, who is the co-lead at CMSC, said the engagement programmes are like “bandages” – interim support before the workers can return to the wider community.



A free online computer lesson organised by migrant worker NGO 24asia Learning Centre on Jul 11. (Photo: Nazmul Khan)

FINANCIAL UNCERTAINTY STILL A BIG CONCERN

Some NGOs, such as the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home), pointed out that aside from the prolonged confinement, other long-standing issues related to salaries, loss of income, and the financial uncertainty faced by their families continue to serve as the biggest stress on the migrant workers’ mental health.

Home said that more recently, some employers are “exploiting the workers’ fears of being repatriated with little prospects of returning to work in Singapore, given the current border measures, to pressure them to continue working under unsafe or unfair conditions and unreasonably low salaries”.

The advocacy group added that the pandemic has made matters worse as workers who would normally lodge a complaint against their employers now feel they have no choice but to tolerate their situation as they do not want to lose their jobs.

Movement curbs have also prevented workers from getting help, especially those who work in factory-converted dorms, construction temporary quarters, or their employers' premises, where there may not be an Ace team member from MOM stationed at all times, Home said.

READ: Commentary: Foreign labour shortages in construction sector is a wake-up call for change

Mr Bernard Menon, executive director of Migrant Workers' Centre, said for the majority of migrant workers, most of their anxieties are "very much related to the uncertainty surrounding if they are able to resume work, or (if) they still have a job in Singapore".

"Thankfully, prior to (the 'heightened alert' phase), the majority of the migrant workers were able to go back to work and this had a positive impact on their psychological well-being. Being able to return to work has provided our migrant workers with some respite from the idleness and frustration of having to stay indoors or in their dormitories," he added.



Some NGOs pointed out that aside from the prolonged confinement, other long-standing issues related to salaries, loss of income, and the financial uncertainty faced by their families continue to serve as the biggest stress on the migrant workers' mental health. (Photo: TODAY/Raj Nadarajan)

Ms Dipa Swaminathan, founder of migrant worker advocacy group ItsRainingRaincoats, noted that in her experience, salary issues remain the biggest concern for the workers.

"If quarantines and lockdowns get to a point where their wages are docked or delayed or unpaid, that is when it would have the highest potential to become a mental health problem," she said.

MISSING FAMILY, WORRYING FOR THEIR SAFETY



As of Jul 15, Bangladesh had reported a total of 1,071,774 cases, and recorded 17,278 deaths.

In India, there were 30,946,074 confirmed cases of infections as of Thursday, with 411,408 deaths reported.

Mr Rubel said he worries about his parents living in Bangladesh and fears that he may lose them to the disease.

"It's okay if I lose money, but if I lose my family it would be difficult for me to handle," he said.

Mr Alex Au, vice-president of migrant rights group TWC2, said these concerns, coupled with the strict movement controls, have led some migrant workers to call it quits in Singapore and return home to be with their family.

"The workers may tolerate (the movement curbs) so long as they have a job, but as we saw in the first half of 2021, some workers who had lost one job turned down the opportunity to transfer to another company, preferring to go back to India and Bangladesh. Our sense is that it was no longer attractive (to them) to work in Singapore," he said.

According to MOM's most recent labour market report, employment levels in the construction sector contracted by over 50,000 in 2020 to 405,600 in the first quarter of this year.

Indeed, the migrant workers whom TODAY interviewed said being cooped up in the dormitories have made them think of their families more and how much they long to be reunited with them once the borders reopen.

Mr Hasan Md Rakibul, a dormitory worker staying at The Leo in Kaki Bukit, said the last time he saw his father was in 2018.

He had visited his father, who is a migrant worker in Malaysia, for four days. "We hugged each other and cried and my father told me how much he missed me and how big I have grown," said the 24-year-old technician and factory supervisor at Kampong Ubi.

Because his father is still working in Malaysia, Mr Hasan has no idea when they will meet again.

So for now, all he has is a much-cherished water bottle which his father gave him during that 2018 visit.

"I don't let anyone touch the bottle because it is a gift from my father. I miss him the most".

As the likes of Mr Hasan await the day when they can meet their loved ones in the flesh, some migrant worker advocates, like TWC2's Mr Au, said what can help the workers mentally is a roadmap of vaccination targets for migrant workers and specific plans for how the authorities plan to gradually lift restrictions in the dormitories.

"Even if you can't lift restrictions straight away, we should give people hope. Hope can do wonderful things. By holding the cards close to your chest, you don't give people anything to look forward to," he said.



Mr Hasan Md Rakibul, a dormitory worker staying at The Leo in Kaki Bukit, said the last time he saw his father was in 2018. (Photo: TODAY/Raj Nadarajan)

The Straits Times has previously reported that as of May 31, about one-fifth — or 55,000 — of migrant workers living in dormitories have been fully vaccinated.

MOM said that the authorities have made “good progress” in vaccinating the migrant workers.

“We have also begun to provide recovered workers with an earlier COVID-19 infection from over six months ago with the single-dose vaccination to further boost their immunity against COVID-19,” it said.

Former NMP Ms Ong said Singaporeans should take the lead and let their representatives know that they want the workers to be welcomed back into the community.

“We must also do our part to look after them, and that goes beyond just (distributing food and organising activities) ... We need to tell our MPs that we are okay with migrant workers being part of our community,” she said.

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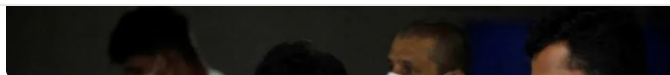
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