



# Buy a discount maid at Singapore's malls

**In Singapore, maids are put on display and made available for 'purchase' in central shopping malls.**

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**[Michael Malay](#)**

Go to the Bukit Timah Shopping Centre, a 1970s mall in central Singapore, and you will find five levels of brightly lit rooms and galleries called "Homekeeper" and "Budget Maid". Inside these rooms, dozens of women sit in a listless, artificial silence. They nod respectfully as you enter, and some watch closely as you speak to staff. You might take one home with you - for two years, or longer.

The women, domestic workers, come from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Myanmar. They sit beneath garish signs and posters, testifying to their friendliness and industriousness, or advertising "super promo" rates and "special discounts".

Some "maid agencies", as they're known locally, display women at work. Along one aisle, domestic workers push each other around in wheelchairs, as though they're taking care of the elderly. In another gallery, a woman cradles a baby doll and pretends to change its diapers. Others stand in mock living rooms ironing the same shirt, or making the same bed - scenes enacted elsewhere in Singapore at malls like Katong Shopping Centre on Mountbatten Road.

Jolovan Wham, executive director of the Humanitarian Organisation of Migration Economics (HOME), a migrant workers advocacy group based in Singapore, said that some agencies market their domestic workers like "commodities". He adds that racial stereotypes are sometimes used in transactions with patrons. "Some of the stereotypes include Filipinos as 'smarter', Indonesians as 'less bright' and Burmese as 'sweet-natured and compliant'."

There have also been complaints of women being underfed at certain employment agencies, according to Ummal Ummairah, president of the Indonesian Family Network (IFN). "We always receive calls about agencies not giving enough food. In one case, an agency was spending \$20 to feed 40 people."

Ummairoh, who also worked as a maid, added that the shopping centres made women look like "dolls at a supermarket".

For Anandha Nurul, a domestic worker who spent seven years in Singapore, her time at the shopping malls was marked by boredom and long hours. "They did not treat me very nicely," she said, recalling that she was fed instant noodles for the three days she was at her agency. "We didn't even boil the noodles properly. We just used warm water."

But standards vary considerably within the industry, and other agencies claim to afford female domestic workers more dignified conditions. "We should be fair and treat these workers as human beings," said Dawn Sng of PrimeChoice Maid Agency, who claims that her agency provides domestic workers with in-house training, free meals, and counselling. "We should not put them into a lower category of people."

### **A multimillion dollar industry**

Bukit Timah and other shopping centres like it are the culmination of networks and organisations extending from Singapore to various parts of Southeast Asia: from brokers who recruit women from poor countries, to training centres that prepare women for life abroad, to "runners" who ferry domestic workers from airports to shopping centres, and finally to the employment agencies themselves, of which there are hundreds in Singapore, competing in what is effectively a multimillion dollar industry. Wham says that there are currently 215,000 domestic workers in Singapore.

For most women, according to Wham, the shopping centres are fleeting experiences that last no longer than a week. Before coming to Singapore, most domestic workers have already found their employers after a phone or webcam interview from their home countries. The malls are essentially transition points, and the women are soon sent to their employers after completing a "settling-in programme" and a mandatory health check.

But some maids return to the malls and can end up staying there for as long as a month. In the language of employment agencies, these women are "transfer maids", and have either been released by their original employers, or have requested to leave after experiencing problems at work.

Shelley Thio, executive member of Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), attributes most problems to "working conditions", and cites verbal abuse, non-payment of wages, and excessive work hours as among the most common reasons domestic workers request formal transfers.

Thio also raised concerns over Singapore's "live-in" requirement, by which a full-time domestic worker is legally obliged to live in the home of her employer.

"We have continually advocated that the live-in requirement is unsatisfactory because it easily leads to abuse," Thio said, adding that some women become vulnerable because of the removal of mobile phones, which isolates them from friends and organisations such as HOME and TWC2.

The live-in requirement can leave women vulnerable to sexual abuse. Earlier this year, a Cambodian domestic worker was sexually harassed by her employer's father, with whom she was made to [share a room](#). Although the woman had complained about this arrangement, both to her employers and employment agency, nothing was done to change her situation prior to the abuse.

### **Poor monitoring and high debts**

Problems in Singapore are sometimes compounded by unscrupulous practises and weak oversight in the female workers' underdeveloped home countries. In Indonesian training centres, for instance, women

commonly complain that dormitories are overcrowded and that they are not given enough food, according to Wahyu Susilo of the advocacy group Migrant Care.

"We are always finding migrant workers in cramped rooms and living with poor sanitary conditions. In one case we found 200 migrant workers sharing two or three toilets."

He adds that monitoring by the Indonesian government is generally weak, which has led to exploitative conditions at a number of centres, including unreasonable fees and deceptive recruitment practises.

In some cases, monitoring of training centres in originating countries is limited due to corruption. According to the managing director of one centre in Indonesia, who spoke to Al Jazeera on the condition of anonymity, local police accept bribes from the training centres they are tasked with inspecting.

Most domestic workers who come to Singapore have large debts in the form of placement fees paid to agencies as monthly salary deductions.

Thio at TWC2 said that she has come across instances where domestic workers end up owing \$4,500 to their agencies, adding that the average debts women accumulate are between \$2,500 and \$3,000.

"High placement fees are charged to the worker because the agencies can get away with it," according to Wham, who said that some agencies disguise these fees as "loans".

"The worker pays these fees because she feels that she doesn't have a choice. And our laws do not make it mandatory for employers to bear the bulk of the fees."

Some domestic maids also work in Singapore illegally. A number of women are employed even though they are underage, according to Thio, and some will be brought into the country under conditions indicative of trafficking.

But at shopping centres, where clients stroll past "Homekeeper" and "Budget Maid", and where domestic workers continue their unending simulation of household work, little of this is expressed or known.

"I watched all those things", recounts Istiana, an Indonesian domestic worker who has recently come to work in Singapore. "Those signs that say 'cheap price' and 'discount maid'. But these are people," she added.

Source: Al Jazeera

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