

> IN FOCUS

BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY

The consequences of neglecting workplace safety are dire – and employers are ultimately responsible for providing a safe working environment for their foreign domestic workers (FDWs).

Employers must understand that they are responsible for the safety of their FDWs. Last year, a businessman was prosecuted and convicted for failing to ensure that his 23-year-old FDW performed her chores in a safe manner. The FDW fell while cleaning the kitchen windows of his third-floor flat and died from her injuries. The employer, who had left the supervision of the FDW to his wife, was slapped with the maximum fine of \$5,000. He could also have been jailed up to six months.

As this case illustrates, an employer can be held liable for endangering the safety of his or her FDW even if he or she has left the direct supervision of the FDW to other family members. The employer and household members may face prosecution if they have put the FDW in situations that endanger their lives or personal safety.

All first-time FDWs undergo a compulsory Safety Awareness Course (SAC) where they are educated on the dangers of working in high-rise environments and taught how to perform chores safely. Employers living in low-rise apartments and landed property should not ignore the dangers of their own environment. For instance, employers should not ask FDWs to prune trees or clean the gutters of rooftops, in a dangerous manner.

Employers must be vigilant and constantly reiterate the importance of safety to their FDWs. They should also provide equipment that allows the FDW to perform the task safely. For instance, if the FDW is required to clean windows in a high-rise environment,



the employer should provide her with window cleaning tools with extended handles – these tools are easily available and allow the FDW to clean windows without having to climb out onto a ledge or lean too far out. FDWs too must be mindful and practise the safety tips they have learnt. There have been cases of FDWs who were injured while performing household chores in unsafe manner, despite having gone through the SAC. Employers should watch out for such unsafe practices and remind the FDW to perform the task in a safe way.

One of them is Surya, 23, who injured her lower back, fractured her arm and permanently damaged her eye socket when she fell out of a window. She had been standing on a chair while cleaning the exterior of a window. Another, is 24-year-old Eni, who leaned too far out of a window and fell while trying to retrieve the laundry. She broke her arm and fractured her hip. Both women sustained

permanent injuries but are lucky to be alive. “I thought I would be okay if I was extra careful,” said Surya. She offers a sombre reminder, “Please don’t stand on a chair (when bringing in laundry), it’s very dangerous. Don’t end up like me.”

WORK SAFE

Window and laundry safety

DO NOT

- Lean too far out of the window
- Stand on tiptoe, chairs or raised platforms, mats or slippery surfaces
- Overload the laundry pole
- Stand on planters or window ledges

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JUST LIKE FAMILY

Mutual respect, clear communication and sincere affection make for a winning formula – at least it did for Uswatun, affectionately known as Watun or ‘mei mei’ (Mandarin for sister) to her employer Ms Veronica Chua and her family. Ms Chua shares how her family and Watun have grown from an employer-employee relationship to treating her as one of the family.

By her own admission, Watun “was clueless” when she first came to Singapore to work eight years ago. Today, the 27-year-old is a capable helper in the Chua household. She recently won a merit award at the recent FDW competition held by the Association of Employment Agencies (Singapore).

Ms Chua recalled, “I had employed Watun to care for my mother and wanted someone quiet and hardworking. Watun was more than that – she is dedicated and caring too.” For about three years, Watun nursed Ms Chua’s bedridden mother. Her dedication won over the family and even earned praise from the doctors at the hospital where Ms Chua’s mother was warded. When the hospital bills grew hefty, Watun even offered to forego her salary to help ease the financial burden. “We were moved by her gesture and sincerity,” said Ms Chua Mui Hong, the employer’s elder sister.

Of course, the initial learning curve was steep for Watun in her first few months on the job. Ms Chua said, “I had to train her to do everything as she was new and in her first job. It took a lot of effort and patience.” She also added that the most important thing is being clear when communicating and to have reasonable expectations. “FDWs are not superhuman and I would only expect them to work in a way that I myself would.” This means clear instructions and demonstrations are essential in the teaching process and understanding cultural differences.

“For example, we use two types of soy sauce here, but in Indonesia there is only the darker kind. So it was important to teach Watun the differences in local food and tastes.”

After Ms Chua’s mother passed away in 2005, Watun stayed on with the family and cared for the Ms Chua’s elderly father. Watun was also asked if she wanted to upgrade herself through courses as Ms Chua felt that she was bright and still young. Watun happily accepted, and she told eNews, “I like to study and find it very interesting”. Since



A picture of domestic bliss!

2005, Watun has taken up short courses in English language, computer skills and cooking. “She was particularly interested in cooking, so we enrolled her in a Food Preparation and Cooking (Culinary Arts) Diploma,” said Ms Chua. It was a year-long full time course, but Watun still managed the household duties well. “She said it’s her responsibility,” said Ms Chua, who was even more impressed when Watun graduated as the best student. The family today enjoys “restaurant style meals” every day.

“Watun is disciplined and has good time management. She can still manage the housework even when doing courses, said Ms Chua, relating Watun’s achievements with pride, as if Watun was her own daughter. “I would be proud to have a daughter like her,” Ms Chua said. As for Watun, she is extremely grateful to the Chuas. “I feel very happy to be able to work and still upgrade myself. I am very lucky to have an extended family here in Singapore.”

FACTS ON ILLEGAL EMPLOYMENT AND DEPLOYMENT

WHAT IS ILLEGAL DEPLOYMENT

Illegal deployment occurs in the following scenarios:

- Official employer arranges for the FDW to work for another person
- Official employer makes the FDW work in another occupation
- Official employer makes the FDW work in another address different from what is specified in the Work Permit

WHAT ARE SOME SCENARIOS THAT CONSTITUTE ILLEGAL EMPLOYMENT OR DEPLOYMENT?

If an official employer sends the FDW to work for another person, the employer is deemed to have illegally deployed the FDW, which is a breach of the Work Permit conditions. In addition, the employer may also be guilty of abetting the illegal employment of the FDW by the other person, who in turn would be guilty of illegal employment.

It is therefore illegal for employers to send their FDWs to work at another relatives' home. The only exception is in the case of employers who send their children and FDW to their relatives' home while they are at work. This is allowed if the FDW agrees to the arrangement and her primary duty is to look after the employer's children and not to do household chores for both families.

There are cases where the employers make their FDWs work at home and perform chores that are supposedly for commercial purposes, for example, preparing food for sale is not acceptable.

There have also been cases where the FDW was asked to work in a commercial enterprise, for example, to serve food or wash dishes in a food stall. In such instances, this would be considered as illegal deployment as performing cleaning work in the commercial enterprise is not considered domestic work.

WHAT ARE THE PENALTIES FOR ILLEGAL EMPLOYMENT OR DEPLOYMENT?

Under the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA), any person who illegally employs or abets the illegal employment of foreigners may face a fine of up to \$15,000, or jail of up to 12 months, or both. Employers who illegally deploy their FDWs maybe fined up to \$5,000, or jailed up to six months, or both.



DO YOU KNOW?



It is YOUR responsibility to send her home

As an employer, you are responsible for repatriating your FDW when her employment contract is terminated, regardless of the actual reason for termination.

When hiring an FDW, employers undertake the responsibility to upkeep and maintain the FDW during the period of employment, and to ensure prompt repatriation once the working relationship is terminated. This responsibility is made known when an employer applies for a Work Permit. It ensures that an employer who brings in an FDW takes personal responsibility for the foreign employee's well-being.

Any other dispute between the employer and foreign employee (unsatisfactory work performance, police reports lodged against the FDW etc.) should be kept separate from the responsibility to repatriate. This is to prevent delays in repatriation, which could cause the FDW to remain in Singapore for an extended period without employment.

FAST SKILLS



FDWs being briefed on the history of the founding of Singapore

SETTLING-IN PROGRAMME

FAST secretary William Chew said, "Employers will ultimately benefit from having their FDWs know the expectations of Singaporeans. A happier, better adjusted FDW is a better worker."

"If she's a happy FDW, she can meet my expectations better," echoed Ms Peggy Leong, one of the first employers who signed up her FDW for the programme. Ms Leong hopes the course will give her FDW more confidence in going about her work.

FAST has launched a four-month pilot from May to August.

Programme duration

- Each programme consists of four modules (4 hours each) over four months for each intake.

- Next intake (September to December 2010) will be opened in August for registration.
- An administration fee will be charged for all participants.

Registration for the programme

- Registration can be done on-line via the People's Association (PA) website at www.one.pa.gov.sg using the FDW's FIN number.
- Alternatively, employers or FDWs can also register in person at any PA community centres/clubs using the FDW's work permit.
- FDW will receive a certificate of participation from the participating community clubs upon completion of all four modules.

SAFE ZONE

SAFE @ HOME

FDWs may not always be aware of the potential dangers in her working environment. Employers can prevent household mishaps by educating FDWs on safety tips in the home.



- Avoid burns and scalds by ensuring handles of pots and pans on the stove are turned inward and not in the way of elbows



- Use kitchen mittens or a damp cloth when handling hot pans, woks or baking trays



- When cleaning any electrical appliance (standing fans, lamps, etc), ensure that the main power is turned off



- Never leave cooking fires unattended for long periods – use a kitchen timer to ensure frequent checks



- Always ensure hands are dry when touching any electrical appliance, socket or plug



- Never mix toxic chemicals (such as bleach, fertilizers and cleaning solutions) with items used for eating

READERS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Do you have a good tip to share on managing your foreign domestic worker? We would love to hear from you. Email your suggestions to MOM_FMMD_eNews@mom.gov.sg. The best tips will be published in this column for the next issue. (We seek your understanding that we may not be able to respond to all emails.)