



INDONESIAN DOMESTIC WORKERS AND THE LACK OF FOOD SECURITY IN SINGAPORE

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Summary: Many Indonesian women travel to Singapore to take up jobs as domestic workers in households, where employers are required to provide them with food. Despite working in one of the most affluent countries in the world, there are concerns that domestic workers do not get enough to eat on the job. This report summarizes a study about food security conducted among Indonesian domestic workers in 2016 in Singapore. Using qualitative methods, the author interviewed domestic workers and employers, and administered a food security questionnaire. Findings show that many domestic workers struggle to get food while working in households, even though food is abundant in these households. The majority of respondents did not get enough to eat, regularly ate a limited variety of food, and often went to bed hungry in employers' homes. Domestic workers were often given smaller portions of food than employers, and spoiled food or leftovers from employers' plates. Some workers were expected to eat foods that were prohibited within their religion. Employers deliberately managed domestic workers' food intake. They used food as a strategy to maintain domestic workers' lower status in the household. As a result, domestic workers lost weight, and were weak, malnourished, and emotionally distressed. Domestic workers used strategies to cope with this food insecurity, such as drinking water to suppress their hunger, while they dealt with employers who treat them poorly. In order to improve the health and well-being of domestic workers, this study recommends the Singapore Ministry of Manpower implement regulations regarding domestic worker rights around food access. The Ministry needs to reduce barriers to reporting food insecurity, provide more training to employers on feeding workers well, and implement mandatory household checks. Employers need to provide domestic workers with more and better food, without conditions and punishment. Domestic workers, as with all residents of Singapore, are entitled to food security in the home.

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What Is the Problem?

Many impoverished women from Indonesia migrate to Singapore to work as domestic workers in households. National policies require employers to provide these women with food, shelter, and a salary. Although Singapore was ranked as the third most food secure country in the world in 2016,¹ media reports have suggested that domestic workers struggle to get enough to eat while at work. In 2012, Singapore's Ministry of Manpower (MOM) modified the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA) to include employers' responsibilities to provide "adequate" food for domestic workers.² More recently, MOM published an example of a day's food intake on their website.³ For domestic workers' lunch, they suggest "1 bowl of rice + three-quarter cup of cooked vegetables + palm-sized amount of meat (fish/poultry/beef/lamb) + fruit." These guidelines are offered as suggestions only, and are not regulated.

Although employers are by law supposed to provide food, housing and days off, many employers violate these laws, and many withhold food.⁴ While food is vital for life, domestic workers in particular need food security in order to have enough energy to do their demanding household labour. Food security is the ability to access safe, nutritious and personally acceptable food, at all times, and in socially acceptable ways.⁵ This study sought to find out if domestic workers enjoy food security in households, under Singapore's current regulations.⁶

How Was the Study Done?

This study used qualitative methods to get an in-depth understanding of domestic workers' experiences. It focused on women from Indonesia, who make up the majority of domestic workers in Singapore.⁷ In 2016, the author conducted multiple in-depth interviews with 28 Indonesian domestic workers recruited through several different networks, 18 employers of Indonesian domestic workers recruited through several networks, and 38 individuals who work with Indonesian domestic workers in various capacities. Additionally, 16 domestic workers filled out a questionnaire designed by the Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance Project (FANTA) to measure food security in the household.⁸ The research focused on domestic workers' food security experiences and their interactions with food. The author observed many food-related activities domestic workers engaged in, including food shopping, eating and social activities outside employers' households. To protect domestic workers from suffering any negative impact from participating in the study, this study carefully maintained ethical standards. The author did not visit the homes where domestic worker respondents work or meet their employers in order to protect them from potential harm from their employers. This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Victoria in 2016.

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About the Program

The Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives' Migration and Mobility Program is a dynamic, interdisciplinary program housed at the University of Victoria, Canada. The program offers research, policy, and knowledge mobilization on themes pertaining to human migration and mobility within, from, and through the Asia-Pacific region: <https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/capi/research/index.php>

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What Was Learned about Domestic Workers' Food Security?

Among all the Indonesian domestic workers who participated in the study, 93% had ever experienced food insecurity in some form while working in Singapore. They were food insecure either with current employers or with a past employer. In current employment conditions, roughly half (49%) of domestic workers interviewed were hungry on a regular basis, did not eat enough to be able to work effectively, and suffered from the physical impacts of inadequate food intake, such as losing weight and falling sick. Many domestic workers also struggled to get culturally satisfying food in current employers' homes. The following chart summarizes some of the results of the 16 domestic workers who responded to the FANTA food security questionnaire.

Questions from the FANTA Questionnaire, n=16	Never or Rarely	Sometimes or Often
1. In the past four weeks, did you have to eat a limited variety of foods due to a lack of availability?	5 (31%)	11 (69%)
2. In the past four weeks, did you go to sleep at night hungry because there was not enough food?	7 (44%)	9 (56%)
3. In the past four weeks, did you have to eat a smaller meal than you felt you needed because there was not enough food?	7 (44%)	9 (56%)
4. In the past four weeks, was there ever no food to eat of any kind available to you in your employer's household?	12 (75%)	4 (25%)
5. In the past four weeks, were you not able to eat the kinds of foods you preferred because of a lack of availability?	6 (37%)	10 (63%)

Results from the questionnaire show that most domestic workers ate limited varieties of food that they did not find satisfying. They struggled to get enough food to feel full. In interviews, domestic workers described challenges to food security. The most common challenges were:

Domestic workers were given small portions, spoiled food, or poor quality food: "Ma'am told me to eat expired bread; it had a white colour, got mould"

Domestic workers often went hungry and did not eat enough to be able to work effectively. They were commonly fed poor quality food that employers refused to eat, such as leftovers, stale or mouldy food, and biscuits, while employers ate meat and fruit. Domestic workers struggled the most with being only given instant noodles and bread to eat. They needed rice, meats, eggs, and fruit to have enough energy to work.

Domestic workers were overworked and underfed: "I'm very thin and very sick because not enough food and too much jobs"

Many domestic workers were overworked and did not get enough food. Many had to complete tasks that were not in their contracts. They often worked in multiple households at the same time, and cared for employers' children and parents while cooking and cleaning. Even though some employers made domestic workers work 19 hours a day with no days off, they consistently did not give them enough nutritious food to sustain this extra work.

Employers imposed strict rules around eating: "I must wait for my employer to eat and all work must finish before I can eat"

Most domestic workers were forbidden to eat until after employers had eaten. As a result, many domestic workers were hungry from working long hours without eating any food. After waiting for employers to finish eating and cleaning up the kitchen, it would often be too late to eat employers' leftovers, or to cook another meal if no leftovers remained. Domestic workers often had to skip dinner and go to bed hungry.



Employers manipulated food to control domestic workers: “I take the tail of the fish, and my employer shout at me”

Employers often controlled domestic workers’ eating to communicate their lower status in the household. Many domestic workers said they were the only person in the household who had to ask for permission to eat food. Some employers counted food to keep track of domestic workers’ eating. Employers often made domestic workers feel uncomfortable asking for food. Employers complained about food disappearing, or shouted at domestic workers for eating food. Many domestic workers were verbally abused for eating food they were told they were allowed to eat, and were blamed for eating food that they never ate. They responded by being afraid to eat any food in the household, and often went hungry.

Employers’ family members controlled food: “My employer’s parents are very stingy and don’t give me proper food”

Many family members in households collaborated to control domestic workers’ food intake. When employers illegally forced domestic workers to work for family members in more than one household, domestic workers experienced heightened food insecurity.

Domestic workers physically suffered from food insecurity: “I lost 12 kg, my stomach very pain with gastric problem, and a lot of my hair fall out”

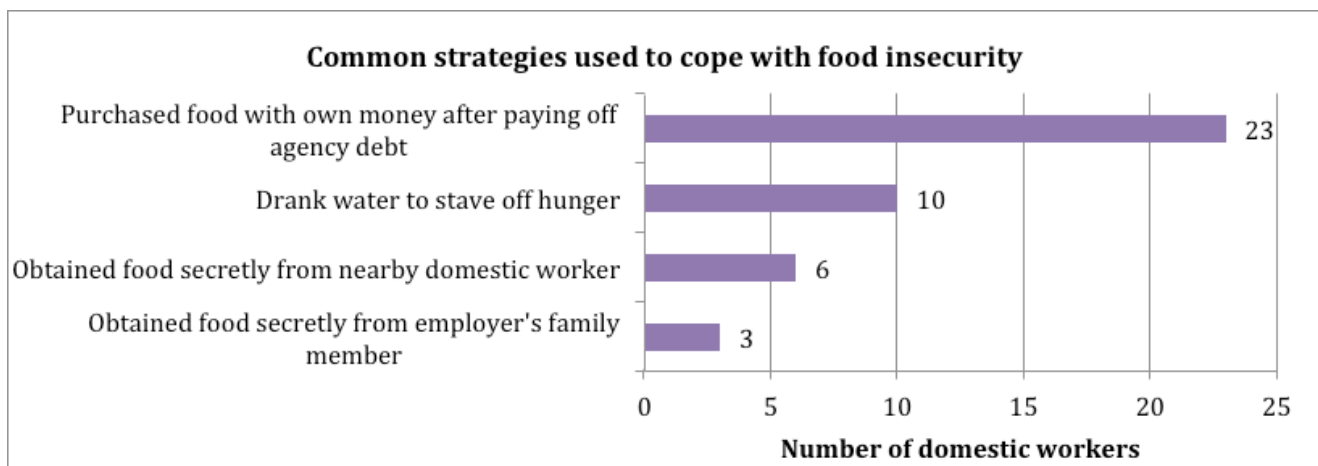
Many domestic workers lost weight, and became ill, weak, and emotionally distressed from employers’ deliberate management of food. Eating food that was unhealthy and unsafe, such as instant noodles and spoiled and mouldy leftovers, made domestic workers continuously worry about their health.

Domestic workers faced many barriers to reporting food insecurity: “When we don’t eat rice I feel hungry, but I don’t dare to say anything to my employer because I am afraid they will send me back”

Domestic workers often stayed quiet about their food insecurity because they feared employers would end their contracts and send them home. They were told that employers did not like hiring domestic workers who reported previous employers for food insecurity.

Domestic workers strategized to cope with food insecurity: “If I hungry I just drink a lot of water”

Domestic workers had to take measures to cope with food insecurity. They drank water to suppress hunger, especially in the first year of the contract. If they were not allowed to go outside or talk to anyone, women often asked a neighbouring domestic worker to purchase food for them. The graph below describes everyday strategies domestic workers used to obtain food, and the number of workers who have regularly used each strategy.



Fear, fatigue, surveillance and bad food together create significant challenges for domestic workers who try to obtain food security. In order to obtain food security at work, domestic workers need more support from MOM and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and they need employers to modify their behaviour.

How Can We Improve Domestic Worker's Food Security?

For domestic workers to achieve more food secure work conditions, more steps need to be actively taken to remove the barriers they face to getting sufficient food in households. The following recommendations can help reduce those barriers:

1. Educate domestic workers in training in Indonesia about their rights around food, and about channels of support available in Singapore to help with food insecurity.
2. Encourage NGOs to work more closely with self-run groups of Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore, such as the Indonesian Family Network, to support domestic workers in food insecure work conditions. Help domestic workers organize a network that will offer free culturally satisfying food on a weekly basis.

Recommendations for Employers

3. Stop using food as a strategy of control in the household. Allow domestic workers to eat food at any time of day, and without having to ask for permission.
4. Create a home environment where domestic workers can voice their concerns. Recognize that yelling at workers and withholding food constitute forms of abuse, and are illegal. Supervise how family members treat domestic workers around food.
5. Report neighbours and friends who mistreat domestic workers. Tell domestic workers who are abused about options for reporting food insecurity, and ask if they want you to report their conditions for them.

Recommendations for MOM

6. Require employers to allow domestic workers to access a phone regularly, to leave the house, and to speak to neighbours.
7. Remove employers' power to send domestic workers home, and remove employers' power to deny permission to domestic workers to transfer employers.
8. Make minimum daily food allowances mandatory in EFMA laws. Train employers about domestic workers' need for at least three meals a day of culturally appropriate foods. Implement strict and clear penalties for not providing food security.
9. Modify the Employers' Orientation Programme to enforce a full- or half-day workshop that must be completed in-person by all employers. Include information about food security to teach employers about the amount and kinds of foods domestic workers need to eat. Teach employers how to communicate about food with domestic workers in a non-violent way.
10. Implement mandatory unannounced check-ins for all households with domestic workers.

In the affluent, food secure nation of Singapore, the prevalence of hunger among domestic workers documented in this study is unacceptable. Domestic workers' food insecurity requires urgent attention. Domestic workers are entitled to the fundamental right of equitable and regular access to nutritious and satisfying food, in ways that respect their human dignity.

Notes

¹ EIU (Economist Intelligence Unit). 2016. "Singapore." Global Food Security Index. Accessed October 20, 2017. <http://foodsecurityindex.eiu.com/Country/Details#Singapore>.

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⁵ Koc, Mustafa, and Jennifer Welsh. 2002. "Food, Foodways and Immigrant Experience." Paper presented at the Canadian Ethnic Studies Association Conference, Multiculturalism Program, Department of Canadian Heritage, Halifax, November 2001.

⁶ See full results in Mohammed, Charlene. 2017. "Hunger in Households of Plenty: Indonesian Domestic Workers Navigating Towards Food Security in Singapore." Master's Thesis, University of Victoria.

⁷ Yu, Wei Tay. 2016. "Foreign Domestic Workers' Living Conditions Survey." Singapore: Transient Workers Count Too. Accessed October 19, 2017. http://twc2.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FDW-Report_Final.pdf.

⁸ Coates, Jennifer, Anne Swindale, and Paula Bilinsky. 2007. Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) for Measurement of Food Access: Indicator Guide. Version 3. Washington, DC: Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance Project, Academy for Educational Development. Accessed December 12, 2017. http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/eufao-fsi4dm/doc-training/hfiass.pdf.

