

# CONFESSIONS OF A MAID AGENT

By James Quek

A loan shark once shared with me the mystery of his trade. It goes like this.

*“You needed money. The banks won’t lend to you and your friends have forsaken you. When you were in dire straits, I gave you a lifeline. I loaned you money when nobody else would. You should be grateful to me and not begrudge the high interest rates charged. Remember, I helped you in your moment of great need.”*

That, in a nutshell, is how it also works in the maid industry.

## CONSIDER THE MAID<sup>1</sup>

She is lowly educated and has little possibility of getting a decent job in her home country. Even if she did, it is for very low pay. Then comes the opportunity to work in Singapore. There is good money to be made, sometimes five to seven times what she can get in her home country. There will be a commission to be paid to the recruiter, of course, amounting to 25% or more of her total earnings for the two years. No matter. It is better than sitting at home and doing nothing. Besides, this commission is not paid upfront but deducted from her monthly salary. Good deal, she thinks. And so it is, considering her desperation to support her family.

## ENTER THE AGENT

He holds out the promise of a good job with good pay for the maid. He underwrites all the costs of recruiting, training and food and lodging. He has to overcome legal and licensing hoops as well as grease many palms along the way. One false move and he goes to jail for “human trafficking.” So why shouldn’t he charge the maid a “fair” sum of money? After all, he is throwing her a lifeline, a way out of long-term poverty. He shoulders all the risks. Should he not have a “fair” return for his labour?

## THE PLOT THICKENS

Employers want to hire a good maid at the best possible price (read lowest possible price). Employers are not always concerned about what a fair price to pay to hire a maid is. Uppermost in their minds is the question “How much do I have to pay?” With a multitude of maid agencies in Singapore, the inevitable price cutting kicks in.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “maid” is used respectfully in this article. The politically correct reference would be Foreign Domestic Worker (FDW) or Household Service Worker (HSW), Domestic Helpers, Housemaids etc. But these neutral terms do not convey the unequal power relationship between employers and the girls (our preferred usage), which is the purpose of this article. My apologies to anyone who may be offended.

So employers hunt for the cheapest agencies in town. The more discerning ones will seek out those maid agencies that will not “over-charge” or “exploit” them. With the cost of doing business being equal to all maid agencies, the business becomes a zero-sum game. Maid agencies are forced to charge employers a low price. To make up the difference, the cost is passed on to the maids. To put it simply, the less the employer pays, the more the maid pays. To put it bluntly, the maid is subsidising the employer’s cost of hiring her.

## **CONSPIRACY THEORY**

Truth be told, most employers will be aghast to know that their maids are subsidising their own hiring. Most employers will say, “I thought it is just a market practice.” Others say, “It’s none of my business if that’s how things work.” The more blatant ones will admit, “I don’t care how much you charge the maids. Just charge me as little as possible.” Similarly, most maids are blissfully unaware that they are paying their employers a handsome sum for the privilege of working for them. They are just grateful that they have a job in Singapore. Maid agencies, of course, smell an opportunity and are quick to cash in. Not much can be done about bargain-hunting employers, they think, so just stack it all on the unsuspecting maids. The best part is, everyone’s happy. The employer got herself a bargain, the maids got themselves a good-paying job, and the maid agencies have a nice slice of the pie.

## **THE BLAME GAME**

Maid agencies in Singapore are a much maligned group often accused of being “blood-sucking vampires.” They feel anguish for being wrongfully accused of exploiting the maids. “Suppliers in source countries charge more than they should,” they say. Suppliers in the source countries however beg to defer. “Singapore agencies are pocketing more than the 2 months allowed under the law,” suppliers say. It’s anybody’s guess where the buck stops. Employers simply plead ignorance.

## **LEGISLATION AND REGULATIONS**

Everyone agrees that the hapless maids are being exploited, and everyone thinks they have a solution. Are there rogue maid agencies? Implement licensing, impose accreditation, and draw up even more regulations. Yet the problem persists. Are there bad employers? Persuade them, threaten them, and educate them. Yet the problem persists. At the root of it all, the unequal debt burden for the maids remains unsolved. Government regulators in both Singapore and source countries dance around the problem without really solving the problem.

## **SO, WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?**

Everybody’s happy. The maids are happy that they have a job. Employers are happy that their hiring cost is being subsidized by the maids and maid agencies in Singapore and suppliers in source countries are getting a fair (some say unfair) return for their labour. So don’t rock the boat. The maid was desperate for a job, and the maid agencies and employers made it possible. They threw the maid a lifeline in her moment of need and she should be grateful for the chance to work in Singapore. Sounds familiar?

## SHOULD SHE BE GRATEFUL?

Just as the borrower should not begrudge the loan shark his high interest rate, maids should not complain about high placement fees and subsidizing the employer's hiring cost. When confronted with this logic, most employers would be indignant. "This cannot be right," they say. Yet they will acquiesce to the market practice perpetrated by the maid industry, and thus become complicit in the exploitation of the maids. The market practice tells the maids, "This is what you have to pay to get a job in Singapore." Market practice tells the employers, "This is what the maids need to pay to work in Singapore, and they are willing to pay it. So it is okay."

## EVERYBODY'S HAPPY

Really? The real losers are the employers. Some suppliers train their maids. Some don't. Some suppliers comply with Singapore's minimum age and education requirements for the maids. Some don't. Some suppliers are truthful in the profiling of the maids. Some are not. Suppliers have an "inventory" of maids to send off to work overseas quickly or else business costs will rise. Costs include food and lodging, homesick maids running away, maids falling ill or getting pregnant which disqualify them from working.

It is one big race to find employers for them as quickly as possible. So when employers ask, "Can she work without rest days for two years?" Check. "Can she go without a handphone?" Check. "Can she work for a vegetarian family?" Check. "Can she take care of 12 dogs?" Check. "Can she work in a 3-story bungalow?" Check. "Can she take care of a bedridden old man?" Check. "Can she sleep in the kitchen?" Check. "Can she agree to all of the above?" Check. Check. Check.

Is it any surprise therefore that employers get a rude shock when they fetch their maids from the agency? The maids are anything but. Some are under-aged. Some are poorly trained. Some are lazy. Some simply refuse to work. Some are rude and ill-mannered. Some are immediately homesick. Most will take a long time to adjust to life in fast-paced Singapore.

Many maids are clueless as to their job scopes. Their trepidation of working in another country usually proved to be well-founded. Nothing will prepare the maids for an impatient Singaporean employer with great expectations. They are given work for which they are not trained or well-equipped. They are expected to hit the road running and multi-task like all Singaporeans.

A high standard of cleanliness and household upkeep is expected of the maids, in addition to tube-feeding the old grandmother and walking the dog. Not to mention fending off ill-behaved children who like to beat her and poke her with pencils. Many maids suffer from verbal abuse from the day they start work and are called stupid for all the days that follow. Some labour from early morning to night without rest, yet employers will complain that they are slow and have poor time-management. "If she can manage her time better, she can sleep early every day. After all, there isn't much to do in this house."

Under these circumstances, many maids suffer from poor mental health, some to breaking point causing them to commit acts of violence. When the present pain is unbearable, their great need to earn money and support their families back home becomes largely irrelevant. Thankfully, Singapore laws allow for the maid to “resign” from the employment. However, some maids are ignorant about this. Sometimes employers simply shrug off the request and keep the maids a virtual prisoner in the house in case she runs away. “After all, she signed a two-year contract and she must finish it. She cannot quit just like that,” the employer reasons.

However, the same employer will not hesitate to pack off the maid to the airport at a moment’s notice. This is in violation of Singapore laws that require employers to give the maid advance notice. However, each day maids are routinely sent home without due process. Once the work permit is cancelled and the maid is out of the country, she has little recourse for her grievances and is unable to recover any unpaid salaries. In one case, the employer got the maid to sign off on salaries paid, took back the salary as payment for damage to household items, and repatriated her.

### **THERE IS ONLY ONE WINNER**

While employers might think that they have found a bargain and the maid was delighted to land a job, the nightmare has only just begun. There are no winners in the event of a termination or resignation, except for the maid agency. Agency fees paid are non-refundable and sometimes employers lose their placement fee. Getting a “free” replacement means paying the agency some fees all over again. Besides the trauma of being sacked, the maid has to pay another set of placement fee to the agency to help her find a new employer. Is it any wonder therefore that some unscrupulous maid agencies do not find it in their interest to match the right maids to the right employers? There is additional money to be made in failed placements.

### **AN ETHICAL SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM IN THE MAID INDUSTRY?**

The sad reality is, there is no ethical solution to this problem. There are pockets of ethical practices in the industry. There are many ethical maid agencies in Singapore. There are many ethical suppliers of maids in the source countries. There are many NGOs championing the rights of the maids. Governments have put in place legislations for the protection of the maids. The maid industry in Singapore is being legislated to death but that has failed to rein in unscrupulous maid agencies. Persuasion has failed. NGOs railed against the government and against every misdemeanor of employers. But maids continue to suffer from unfair employment terms and abuse in the face of an unequal power relationship.

The only solution to the problem in the maid industry is not an ethical one but an economic one. Imagine this:

1. Suppliers find that it is in their economic interest to ensure that their maids are well-trained and well-equipped. They know that it is not in their interest to provide inaccurate profiles.

2. Singapore maid agencies find that it is in their best business interest to provide good job-matching and to treat both employers and the maids as their clients – thus providing good service to employers and ensuring the welfare of the maids.
3. Employers realise that the best bargain they can ever get is a well-trained, well-motivated and happy maid. Employers find that extending patience and grace to their maids is the best cost-savings they can get.

## MARKET FORCES MUST REPLACE MARKET PRACTICES

It is an unfortunate fact that people are selfish and self-serving. Businesses exist to maximise profit. Without demanding that every maid agency becomes a social enterprise, it is possible to show suppliers, maid agencies and employers that it is in their best interest not to exploit the maids and to ensure their welfare. It's just business, no doubt. But good business practices can also be good for business. The time has come for a major marketplace disruption, a disruption that forces all stakeholders – suppliers, maid agencies and employers – to do what's in their best interest. When that happens, the final beneficiaries will be the maids themselves.

## ABOUT MYHELPER PTE LTD

MyHelper Pte Ltd is a registered social enterprise (Business for Good) and the winner of the inaugural "Brands for Good" award 2018 (Fair Employment Practices). MyHelper is also a member of the Association of Employment Agencies (Singapore).

MyHelper was birthed in 2013 to address the systemic problems in the maid industry. It identified two main issues confronting maids in Singapore – high placement fees and the lack of welfare and protection post-deployment – and seeks to address them through ethical business practices.

**High placement fee.** MyHelper works with ethical suppliers who share our values and our objective of alleviating the debt burden of the maids. Placement fees charged to the maids are reduced to the minimum or waived under circumstances.

**Maid welfare and protection.** MyHelper provides psycho-social support for the maids after their deployment to their employers.

1. MyHelper negotiates favourable terms of employment and salaries for the maids, and match them with suitable employers.
2. MyHelper has a mentoring programme to monitor the well-being of the maids for the first six months after deployment. Gathering feedback from both employers and the maids, it is able to red flag any breakdown in the employer-maid relationship and take corrective actions.

3. MyHelper organises regular outings for the maids to refresh themselves and make new friends that employers can trust.
4. To encourage the maids to work hard and complete their contracts, the agency gives each maid a cash award of \$100 on their first anniversary and \$200 upon the completion of their contracts.
5. To prepare the maids for life after Singapore, the agency encourages the maids to take up courses and pick up new skills through any third-party providers. Maids who complete a certification course get a 50% rebate on their course fees. Healthcare and nursing courses are by far the most popular.
6. MyHelper offers financial literacy counselling to the maids and helps them with a budgeting and savings plan.
7. MyHelper provides trauma counselling, spiritual support and shelter for maids who have been abused.

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#### **ABOUT THE WRITER**

James Quek is an ex-journalist, entrepreneur and previously the Executive Director of World Vision Singapore, an international Christian humanitarian organisation. World Vision Singapore has long-term poverty alleviation projects in 16 countries. In his travels to the projects, he saw that women were the standard bearers in taking care of the family. When things became untenable, many had to make sacrifices by becoming maids overseas or by sending their daughters to work as maids overseas to support the family. In many instances they risk being the victims of exploitation and human trafficking rings. James Quek hopes to make life a little easier for these hardy women who have left the safety and comfort of their homes in search of work opportunities in Singapore.

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