

PETALING JAYA: They pay thousands of ringgit, but end up with splitting headaches.

Many families who put their faith in maids to look after their children and the elderly and to take care of their homes are getting the short end of the stick.

What is promised and what they get does not seem to add up. Stories abound of maids who cannot perform the simplest of chores and those who are medically or mentally unfit. Some simply run away.

When their employers, many of whom are average wage earners, complain and seek refunds from the maid agencies, they rarely get a proper hearing.

The numbers provided by the National Consumer Complaints Centre (NCCC) and the Consumer Claims Tribunal show that Malaysians are increasingly disenchanted with the services provided by maids and the agencies handling them.

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Last year, 434 complaints were lodged with the NCCC against these agencies and the maids they provided. The number this year stood at 298 as of May.

At the Consumer Claims Tribunal, 270 cases involving maid services agencies were heard last year, compared with 105 in 2004 and 89 in 2003. NCCC manager Darshan Singh said the main problem was misrepresentation by the maid agencies.

This, he said, included the age of the maids, their health and marital status and work experience.

"The prospective employers are given the resumes of maids and they would make a choice according to their requirement. The problem is that most of the time these details are not true," he said.

"Because of the false particulars, a 16-year-old with no experience could be brought in to look after children."

Darshan said there were also cases of maids with tuberculosis and other diseases, as well as mentally unfit persons.

"Imagine these people looking after your children and loved ones."

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Written by Administrator
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If an employer was not satisfied with a maid, most agencies would replace her provided this is done within three months of her employment.

The "returned" maid would be sent to another employer who, too, was unhappy with a newly employed maid.

Darshan said this meant that two problematic maids would be swapped between two employers to beat the three-month "replaceable" period.

"When the three months are over, the maids could not be returned or a refund obtained. To get a new maid, the employer would have to pay the full agency fees all over again."

Darshan said he had also received reports of agencies colluding with the maids, asking them to abscond after three months to make the employer pay the full fees to obtain a new maid.

Dissatisfied employers can turn to the Consumer Claims Tribunal, but going this route does not always end well.

"Sometimes the tribunal makes both parties share the cost, when in fact, the employer is not at fault," Darshan said.

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Tribunal chairman Rungit Singh said cases against maid agencies were on the rise as they were not able to match the high expectations of the employers.

He said most of the cases concerned unsuitable maids, sick maids and underage maids.

Evidence given at the tribunal showed that maids had to run the household and when the work became overwhelming, they felt pressured and got sloppy. Some run away.

"The employer then blames the agency, claiming a suitable maid was not provided. But these employers fail to realise that no agency can guarantee a perfect maid."

Rungit said employers paid large sums of money to get their maids, but few were concerned with the breakdown of the amount until the maids ran away or did not meet their requirements.

"And even if replacement maids are provided in the agreement, the relationship between the employer and agency has soured and all he wants is his money back," Rungit said.

"When the case comes before the tribunal, all the standard charges to be paid to government agencies and the agency in the source country are deducted before the amount refundable is calculated.

"Whatever money the agency charged is refunded except where the maid has already provided service and the employer is equally liable for the problem. In such situations, the agency and

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employer are made to share the expenditure."

Rungit said there should be a contract between the employer and the agency specifying his requirements and the promises made by the agency.

"So if you want a maid to look after your children or your elderly parents, specify it. Without this kind of contract, it will be difficult to prove the promises made by the agency to you."