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THEY come with hidden costs, and are not as cheap to hire as they are made out to be, as many Malaysian households have found out. And their work often falls short of expectations. If you have a problematic maid, you cannot depend on the employment agency or the authorities to help you.

The key words are the "RM2,500" cap and "better-trained maids".

But it is a cap that never was. And the Indonesian maid comes poorly trained, or not at all.

There is no limit on the fees an agency is allowed to collect from anyone wanting to hire an Indonesian maid.

The Immigration Department has confirmed that this is the case despite a government announcement of a maximum fee of RM2,500 that was to have taken effect over a year ago.

"When a memorandum of understanding was signed between the Indonesian and Malaysian governments (in Indonesia in April), no specific figure was mentioned," said Foreign Workers Division director Alwi Bavutty.

He said a technical committee, comprising Home Ministry officials and their Indonesian counterparts, will decide on the cap among other things.

"For now, there is no official limit."

So, how much would an Indonesian maid cost?

Before she reaches your doorstep or even picks up a broom, your maid could run up a bill of RM7,000.

The bulk of it goes towards agency fees and six months of the maid's salary, collected in advance by the agency.

Calls to agencies in the Klang Valley revealed that their fees start at RM2,500 but there are more variations to this figure than wardrobe changes in a Hindi movie.

Some include taxes and levies, bringing it up to RM3,700.

It could include a premium charge for Christian maids or add-ons for a longer service warranty period.

The advance salary, with its own variations, is collected to repay the maid's loan to Indonesian recruitment agencies that supplied her to Malaysia.

Is that legal?

"When the maids come to Malaysia, they take an advance to pay for visa, documentation and other things," said Alwi.

"How much they owe depends on their contract with the Indonesian agencies."

"We don't get involved. It is a matter of agreement between the Indonesian and Malaysian agencies and the maid."

Once the maid is ensconced in your house, there's another potential charge to think about - it's called the replacement fee.

This is payable if your maid performs poorly or runs away and you require a new one.

It starts, depending on the agency, at about RM1,000.

On top of that, the employer must pay the agency the maid's salary for the duration she has worked.

Agensi Pekerjaan AZ Sdn Bhd provided these figures for hiring an Indonesian maid on a monthly salary of RM500.

Agency fees: RM3,825 + six-and-a-half months of maid's salary (First payment of RM2,525, then RM1,300 when maid arrives)

Optional runaway maids insurance: RM250 for a year's coverage

If maid runs away within first three months: employer refunded RM1,200

If maid runs away between four and 12 months: employer refunded RM1,600

This is the payment for maid replacement

First month: RM945; Second month: RM1,245; Third month: RM1,545; Fourth month: RM1,845; Fifth month: RM2,145; Sixth month: RM2,445; After six months: Full payment of RM3,825.

'For RM450 a month, what do you expect?'

THE maid situation is not going to get any better.

This is the pronouncement of Jeffry Foo, vice-president of the Association of Malaysian Maid Agencies. And all Malaysians with incompetent or ailing maids will just have to accept their fate.

"Malaysians should learn that they have to live with the shortcomings (of their maids) because they don't get the best maids in the world," Foo says bluntly.

If you want trained maids, he adds, be

prepared to dig deep into your pocket.

It is little wonder then families who have paid at least RM5,000 for a "trained" Indonesian maid are disappointed.

And don't expect much following the recent promises made by the authorities for better regulation of the industry in terms of capping agency fees and getting better trained maids.

Despite the signing of the memorandum of understanding between the Malaysian and Indonesian governments to this effect in April, nothing has been enforced because "details are still being finalised".

This laissez-faire situation has led to a host of problems for employers who have little recourse when stuck with maids who are untrained, have serious medical problems or who are plain lazy.

Maids are usually chosen from glossy and impressive portfolios. The reality is that the maid who shows up at your doorstep rarely matches the description in her resume. And although maid agencies assure you of a replacement if you are dissatisfied with the services of your maid within the first three months, it rarely happens.

Sofia, a mother of two, had a maid who did not know how to wipe a table and was also deaf to boot.

The maid was provided by a prominent agency in the Klang Valley which promised "quality, well-trained and medically fit maids" in its advertisements.

"When I was unhappy with her inability to mop and clean after two weeks, I sought a replacement. The agency told me to send her back for re-training.

"Despite being re-trained twice, she still could not perform her tasks well.

"After the second month, I began to suspect that she was deaf. She admitted to being deaf in one ear. I sent her to an ENT specialist who confirmed she was totally deaf in one ear and partially in the other."

Sofia demanded that the agency replace the maid for free but it refused. "They told me they would replace the maid but I would have to pay about RM2,000 more."

Sofia refused and complained to the authorities but they did not act on it. On why agents even bother coming up with less-than-reliable resumes on maids, Foo says: "It is all marketing."

Don't the agents feel any sense of responsibility?

"It has nothing to do with us. The contract is signed between the employer and the domestic worker.

"We are not a party to the contract. So why should we be held responsible if the maid is not performing to expectations?"

Foo, whose association represents 120 of the 400 maid agencies in the country, said some Malaysian employers are fussy, bossy and demanding.

"There are some who don't want to pay good money for maids. If you pay RM450 a month for a maid, what do you expect?"

A lot of the confusion also arises because two agencies are involved. The Labour Department licenses local employment agencies and the Home Ministry looks into all matters concerning the employment of foreign maids, including enforcement.

"We only license agencies which handle local workers," said Sheikh Yahya Sheikh Mohamed, the acting deputy director-general of the Labour Department.

"But if they want to bring in foreign maids, they have to be registered with the Immigration Department (which comes under the Home Ministry) which has its own criteria for bringing in foreign maids."

Yahya said measures are in place to address the situation.

Pay good money for good service

SHE speaks English, answers the telephone, takes messages, cooks, does the laundry and knows the right temperature to iron your linens.

She is no fantasy maid, but a high-end Indonesian working in Singapore or Taiwan and paid about RM1,000 a month.

"But Malaysians want a RM450 Indonesian maid who can do all this and more," said Jeffry Foo, vice-president of the Association of Malaysian Maid Agencies in Kuala Lumpur.

"In Penang and Johor, there are employers who will pay RM300 to RM350. Can you imagine the kind of maids willing to work for that sum?"

Non-governmental

organisations such as Tenaganita and Women's Aid Organisation said some maids work long hours, don't have minimum wages and no days off.

Foo said: "There are rascals who return home late and then sound the horn, expecting the maid, who should be in bed, to open the gate for him."

And many, he added, are fussy, bossy, restrictive and demanding.

One NGO asked: "What do you expect if she's deprived of basics such as reasonable working hours, good rest and common courtesy?"

Just trained to sweep and mop

THE question came unexpectedly. It was in the midst of queries about hiring an Indonesian maid that the soft and hesitant voice on the line asked: "Are you planning to leave the children with the maid as soon as she comes?"

Asked if that would be a problem, the agency representative said: "Don't leave them (maids) alone with the kids first."

The representative had minutes earlier promised a trained maid.

"Ask your mother or mother-in-law to stay with them for two weeks. Maybe they're not sure how to do things, you know?"

What was the training for then? "We train them to sweep, mop and use electrical equipment but we don't have a real baby, so how do we train them for that one?"

434 complaints to consumer centre

THE National Consumer Complaints Centre received 434 complaints last year and 165 complaints in the first six months of this year.

All of it boils down to just one issue - misrepresentation by maid agencies.

Agencies say their maids are trained, but more often than not it is not the case.

"Agencies are supposed to change your maid if you are not happy with their performance within three months," says the centre's complaints and investigation manager, Darshan Singh.

"But, most of the time, agencies are reluctant to fulfil this condition.

"If the maid runs away before three months is up, they will provide a replacement but you have to pay about RM2,000 for the levy, transportation, medical and other costs. "But, if the maid runs away after three months, you lose everything. There is no recourse for the consumer."

And, even in cases where the Consumer Claims Tribunal rules in favour of the consumer, a big chunk is taken to cover the "administrative costs of the maid agency".

"It's ridiculous! Why should the consumer be penalised when the maid agency is at fault? The consumer should be refunded 100 per cent."

Since the authorities cannot protect consumers, Darshan says, consumers will have to protect themselves.