

Fatal accident highlights need for safe spaces for migrant workers

Many resort to gathering by the roadside on their days off, with non-profit groups saying more needs to be done



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Before Lucky Plaza became a popular hangout for Filipino maids, there was "Gulong Park", where they gathered on weekends.

For more than a decade, the field behind Orchard MRT station where Ion Orchard now sits was a prime spot for Filipino maids to meet.

"Gulong" in Tagalog means "to roll around", hence the maids' name for the place.

"Maids went there for picnics and also to meet their boyfriends," says Madam Leonila Incillo.

"Back then, Lucky Plaza wasn't so crowded. But more and more shops selling Filipino food and products opened at the mall and so more Filipinos headed there."

The 62-year-old is among the 1,365 Filipinos who had set foot in Singapore to work as maids in 1995.

There were already close to 100,000 foreign maids working here then - a number which climbed to 227,100 in 2015 and then to 250,000 today.

In 2015, there were about 70,000 Filipino maids here. Since then, the number has climbed to 80,000, estimates Philippine Embassy in Singapore's labour attache Saul T. De Vries.



Yet, it seems public spaces for these workers have failed to grow in tandem – with many settling for pavements outside Lucky Plaza to spend their days off – until last Sunday's horrific accident, when a car rammed into a group picnicking on a pavement, killing two maids.

It was the same spot where Madam Incillo would meet her 30-year-old daughter, who came here to work as a maid last year, for breakfast or lunch every Sunday.

"Now, I realise it's not safe. I used to think it was the safest place. What happened really opened my eyes. I was wrong, we really shouldn't be sitting beside the road," she says, recalling how her daughter was shopping in Lucky Plaza when the tragedy occurred outside.

Madam Incillo says: "We used to gather inside the mall. But we were accused of overcrowding the mall and were chased out. This happened many years ago."

In 1998, Lucky Plaza management was reported to have chased away Filipino maids, accusing them of vandalising the building.

The management said the Sunday crowd, which could swell to 10,000, was a threat to safety, adding that the crowd blocked fire escapes, walkways and escalators.

In a circular to shop owners, the management said the "cleanup" was necessary.

Madam Incillo says: "So we had to move to the sidewalks outside Lucky Plaza. Many of us went opposite to Wisma Atria and outside Orchard MRT.

"Very quickly, Filipinos set up makeshift stalls outside Lucky Plaza, providing manicure and pedicure services to fellow Filipino workers. There were also massage services, and some were selling clothes. The sidewalks were turned into a mini flea market on weekends."

Following a dip in business, some mall tenants complained to the management, and maids were gradually welcomed back.

From restaurants and pubs to remittance firms, many businesses at Lucky Plaza targeted mainly maids.

The variety of Filipino products and services offered also made them feel at home, says Madam Incillo, explaining why Lucky Plaza has become a "Sunday enclave" for Filipino maids.

There are few other places offering such amenities.

Dr Satveer Kaur-Gill, an instructor at National University of Singapore's Chua Thian Poh Community Leadership Centre, says Singapore is not planned in a way that offers more accessible options for mi-



grant workers to congregate on their days off.

"Locals, too, have not always been welcoming of low-skilled migrants in both public and private spaces patronised by them," adds Dr Kaur-Gill, citing examples of maids being asked to leave shopping malls or prohibited from using the swimming pool and barbecue pits in some condominiums.

Even though non-profit organisations have organised more activities for foreign maids, there are still not enough facilities to cater to the 250,000 of them here.

So, it is inevitable that many of them would head to public places such as the Singapore Botanic Gardens and beaches, or just sit along pedestrian walkways in Orchard Road, during weekends.

Some people have written to the media to complain of how foreign domestic helpers are a nuisance when they play music loudly, sing and dance in the streets.

Dr Kaur-Gill says: "We have ended up with a model where migrant workers have to negotiate with different stakeholders (mall tenants, local patrons, businesses) who see them as individuals who need to be kept watch on or prohibited from public spaces. This does little for integration and only creates segregationist sentiments."

Mr Ethan Guo, general manager of migrant worker advocacy group Transient Workers Count Too, says there is insufficient public space for migrant workers to hang out.

Unlike male workers who stay in dormitories that are mostly self-contained, female domestic workers do not stay in dormitories, and a common option would be to go to the malls, Mr Guo adds.

NOT SAFE BY ROADSIDE

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MADAM LEONILA INCILLO, who was among 1,365 Filipinos who came to Singapore to work as maids in 1995. Her 30-year-old daughter came here to work as a domestic helper last year.

ENHANCING PUBLIC SPACES

Migrants enrich Singapore's identity in multiple ways. The cultural resources they offer (food, socio-cultural activities and economic opportunities), in fact, can only enhance our public spaces if we can also plan with them in mind.



DR SATVEER KAUR-GILL, an instructor at National University of Singapore's Chua Thian Poh Community Leadership Centre, on providing safe spaces for migrant workers on their days off.

While Filipino maids flock to Lucky Plaza, Myanmar workers have been heading to Peninsula Plaza and Indonesian workers to City Plaza.

Madam Incillo, who left Singapore in 2000 to work in Hong Kong before returning here in 2006, says: "In Hong Kong, maids have an option to stay in boarding houses. On our day off, we can gather in our boarding houses to cook and eat.

"Can Singapore have something like this too? That way, we will feel safer, instead of sitting and eating by the roadside."

Filipino maid Gesamie Gabadin, 30, says: "I don't feel safe sitting outside Lucky Plaza. Passers-by would stare at us.

"I also notice motorists sticking their heads out of their vehicles to look at us in curiosity when they drive past. I feel that accidents could happen easily.

"Nowadays, I would take along a mat to sit on the floor inside Ion Orchard. Sometimes, I will go to the foodcourt. Or I would just walk along Orchard Road."

Mr Seah Seng Choon, president of the Foreign Domestic Worker Association for Social Support and Training (Fast) in Bukit Merah, believes that the recent accident has shown it is dangerous for workers to congregate on the roadside.

He is urging them to move to safer places such as parks and gardens.

"We have a clubhouse at Fast, and every Sunday, we get a few hundred foreign domestic workers coming here. They come for dancing and cooking classes," he says.

While the Government does not specially allocate public space for these workers to gather, non-profit organisations can help by allocat-

ing space in their premises and organising activities for the workers, he adds.

Mr Seah says he is in the process of securing a space for Fast that is 10 times bigger than its current location and would be able to accommodate "a few thousand" workers by the second half of the year.

Pastor Billy Lee, executive director of Blessed Grace Social Services (BGSS) in MacPherson, says he has expanded the organisation's premises to accommodate more domestic helpers on weekends.

Currently, about 300 domestic helpers attend activities organised by BGSS on Sundays. With the expansion of its premises, Pastor Lee says he would be able to accommodate a total of 600 domestic helpers.

"We provide activities for them in the afternoons so they can be more occupied, instead of spending their time in the streets," he says.

"We provide food and drinks and free Wi-Fi for them. There is also karaoke. I hope other churches and temples can also open up their premises to them.

"When they congregate in the streets, it's not conducive for them. Loan sharks will approach them to offer them loans."

Dr Kaur-Gill feels migrant workers should not have to negotiate for safe and accessible spaces on their days off.

"Migrants enrich Singapore's identity in multiple ways. The cultural resources they offer (food, socio-cultural activities and economic opportunities), in fact, can only enhance our public spaces if we can also plan with them in mind."

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Top: A 2013 photo showing maids at a walkway between Lucky Plaza and Tong Building in Orchard Road.

Above: Filipino maid Leonila Incillo near the site of the accident at Lucky Plaza where people have placed flowers in memory of the victims. Madam Incillo says this is the spot where she would meet her daughter every Sunday.

ST PHOTOS: LIM YAO HUI, JASON QUAH