

End modern-day slavery in our homes
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A Malaysian employer, Chen Pei Ei was acquitted of the murder of her domestic worker. The employer was freed because the key witnesses who were her family members had disappeared and the police could not find them.

Meanwhile, a 15-year-old teenager was sentenced to be detained under the pleasure of the Pahang sultan for murdering her employer more than a year ago. The psychiatrist report produced in court stated that her mental level was "below that of normal teenagers".

In the first case, a domestic worker's life was taken away brutally and no one was made accountable. And a child is sentenced and punished for the murder of her employer. These two cases raise serious issues on Malaysia's legal system of justice and employment of domestic workers in the country.

The judge in Chen Pei Ei's trial was right in pointing out the weaknesses of the police and prosecution in not making sure that the witnesses are reachable. Was there collusion or advice given to enable freedom from the crime for the Malaysian employer?

In the employment of domestic workers, Malaysia continues to fail in providing protection. The government does not go beyond lip service on labour laws amendments for increased protection of domestic workers.

Domestic workers work in isolated individualised work places and in the private domain. Their passports are held by the employer. They do not have any days off and cannot change their employer according to the work permit issued.

Indonesian domestic workers earn shamefully low wages – between RM400 and RM600 per month – despite working very long hours. They do not get their wages for six months or more as deductions are made to repay the exorbitant recruitment fees charged by recruitment agencies.

The work conditions and tasks are undefined and thus many of them not only take care of babies and household chores but also cook and even take care of the elderly.

The current system of employment supports this form of slavery. And it is worrying that Malaysian employers want to uphold such form of slavery as many have lobbied for no changes in law, no off days and no to domestic workers holding their own passports.

The Malaysian employer being freed gives a perception that now employers can get away with murder because their will be no witnesses.

However, the story is not the same for the domestic worker as she has no one to turn to for help, nor can she leave since she is trapped and "imprisoned" within the walls of her employer's home without passport, off days and money.

In the case of the teenage domestic worker, why is not the agent, the employers and the Home Ministry being made accountable for trafficking in child labour? Why is she sentenced?

How was approval given for her employment? The Home Ministry knows that large numbers of children are recruited to work as domestic workers and yet give approvals.

The government has created a good public relations exercise in relation to human trafficking. However, in terms of combating trafficking, it is dismal and disturbing. The servitude and modern-day slavery on domestic workers in the country is clear and is institutionalised.

We continue to place foreign domestic workers at risk without rights protection. This form of slavery will only lead to more violence and abuse of the workers with impunity.

There is a loud battle cry for justice from the most marginalised and vulnerable groups of women workers but it continues to fall on the deaf ears of authorities and employers because the ears are given to calls for profit and political gain.

In order to gain justice, it becomes more clear that we need change.

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