

CAMBODIAN WOMEN AS FOREIGN DOMESTIC WORKERS
A REPORT ON FIELDWORK RESEARCH FOR RIVERKIDS PROJECT

Prepared by
Hafiza Binte Hassan
Hong Yi Ni, Vionna
Marlina Binte Abdul Shahrarum
Nur Fadhilah Binte Sanib

Advised by
Dr Sallie Yea

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
SINGAPORE

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1. Methods	1
2. Sampling	2
Vulnerabilities of Foreign Domestic Workers	3
1. Women and their Perceptions of Foreign Domestic Workers.....	3
2. General Perceptions of and Attitudes Towards Working Overseas	4
3. Perceived Domestic Work.....	6
Case Studies	7
1. Recruitment Process	7
2. Problems Faced by Individuals Working as Foreign Domestic Workers	8
3. Problems of Reintegration	8
Conclusion	9
1. Recommendations	10
2. Areas for Further Research	10

Appendix

INTRODUCTION

This document reports findings from a study aimed to identify perceptions of women in Phnom Penh's poorer urban communities about working as a Foreign Domestic Worker (hereafter FDW) overseas, especially in countries like Malaysia and Singapore and the situations faced by women who have returned after working as a domestic worker. Since the launch of the Cambodian FDW pilot program by Singapore's Ministry of Manpower, more than 200 Cambodian domestic workers have been employed from Cambodia. Though Cambodian FDWs are new to Singapore, Malaysia has employed them for almost a decade. However, in 2011, the Cambodian government issued a temporary ban on their FDWs to Malaysia due to the increasing number of abuse cases. Hence, the ultimate purpose of this research is to increase awareness and provide recommendations to decrease the vulnerabilities of these women who intend to work overseas as FDWs.

As stated in The Trafficking Protocol,

“Human trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse, of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose exploitation”

The Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that we interviewed for this study like TWC2, LSCW and LICADHO stated that there should be more to what is defined in the Trafficking Protocol as trafficking can happen through legal means. The Cambodian human rights NGO, LICADHO, suggested that the working conditions and the problems of dual contract are trafficking issues. Cambodian anti-trafficking NGO, LSCW, indicated that the withholding of employee's documents should also be one of the indicators in human trafficking.

1. Methods

This project is a qualitative research project where data was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews. Qualitative methods provided powerful insights to the world in that it builds up theory from observations rather than deductively testing theories. Thus, qualitative research is more useful to understand the situations of the Cambodian domestic workers in greater depth. Semi-structured interviews allow for

one-to-one interactions that may allow participants to relate their past experiences, sensitive or not, in more private setting. It allows researchers to explore participants' opinions, clarify relevant issues, elicit complete information and explore sensitive topics within each interview and that the rapport between participants and researchers may improve the validity of the final results. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the community itself. Talking to individuals in their own territory helps to facilitate a more relaxed conversation where researchers can also learn more about the person through observations made by seeing the participants in their own environment.

Women selected by social workers from Riverkids were invited to participate in the research. The women and their families did not have to be clients of Riverkids Project, but were within the charity outreach area. Women who were selected are mostly thinking about working overseas or trying to find a job overseas.

NGOs such as TWC2, HOME, ADHOC, CHAB DAI, LICADHO and LSCW were also interviewed to gather more information on women who have worked abroad as FDWs and might have been abused. TWC2 and HOME are based in Singapore whereas ADHOC, CHAB DAI, LICADHO and LSCW are based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Interviews with these NGOs provided wider perspectives on the current situation and trends of Cambodian women working abroad as FDWs.

2. Sampling

25 interviews were conducted with women from different backgrounds at the Riverkids Office in Phnom Penh. Families received canned goods valued at \$2.50 as compensation for their participation in the research, in line with Riverkids' policy.

Interviews were conducted by the researchers and were facilitated using a list of questions (see Appendix One). All questions were covered during the interview but they were designed so that they could be asked in any order to facilitate discussion and so that new questions may be asked if the discussion led to themes that relates to the topic. Some question were omitted if they were answered or deemed unrelated, depending on the situation during the interview.

Qualified translators were present throughout the interviews because all interviews were conducted in Khmer. The interview facilitator took notes during the interviews; these were then transcribed. The names of the participants and their families have been

changed to protect their privacy and safety. All interviewees were informed of the purpose of the research and how the information would be used.

Whilst the research was designed to be qualitative and not statistically representative, some statistical summaries have been provided in this report to illustrate findings, and for completeness. The monetary terms stated in this report are referred to in USD.

This report focuses on the issues of defining perceptions of domestic work in the community; as well as attitudes towards working overseas and potential migrants' level of awareness. The problems and situations during domestic work overseas are examined in the case study and an analysis of community hopes and expectations surrounding future solutions such as to ensure a safe migration and working environment for the FDWs and prevent exploitation of these women are provided.

VULNERABILITIES OF FOREIGN DOMESTIC WORKERS

On the average, women in the community have educational levels of Grade 5. There were also five women who have no education background and are illiterate. These women have not been to school. They were unable to understand and communicate in any other language, except Khmer. Their knowledge of working overseas, especially as a domestic worker came either through radio advertisements or via word of mouth. This had led them to perceive that working overseas as a domestic worker is safe work which allows them to earn a high salary of about \$500/month. However, having limited or no access to the news and accurate updates on the nature of the job, these women might not be receiving the correct information on what the job as a FDW entails.

1. Women and their Perceptions of Foreign Domestic Workers

Women in the community are very vulnerable in terms of possibly abusive or unsafe labour migration, based on the findings that the majority had insufficient knowledge on other countries, except for Thailand. These women were uninformed about the living conditions and/or economic status of countries like Malaysia and Singapore. Unaware of the conditions and cultures of countries that they might be migrating to, coupled with their low education background, these women are at risk of being exploited and/or deceived when they decide to work overseas.

In addition to the lack of information that these women have access to, most of the participants were unaware of the job scope and responsibilities of a FDW. They only

vaguely mentioned simple household chores like 'cleaning the house, cooking and washing'. Some were aware that they may have to look after the elderly or children.

However, these women are not aware that they will be staying with their employer, resulting in an entire day of housework without specific working hours. Their job scope might also differ from household to household. From the interviews, it could be observed that these women perceived the work that they will be doing to be easy and manageable as it is similar to doing their own household chores. Unfortunately, they were not able to foresee that the living conditions and nature of the household that they will be working in are different. The households that they might be working in are likely to be bigger and have more occupants, differing from their perception. With the language barrier, coupled with the lack of knowledge on the job scope and expectations, these women might not be able to carry out their duties satisfactorily. When employers are upset and unsatisfied with the working performance of these women, there may be an additional risk of these women being abused either verbally, physically or both. One of the returned women interviewed, Lina, did shared that her first employer had abused her verbally by threatening her and used unpleasant names on her.

2. General Perception of and Attitudes towards Working Overseas

Jobs Opportunities Overseas

When asked whether participants have heard about job opportunities overseas, all except two women said that they are aware of the jobs available to them abroad in countries like Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Thailand and South Korea. Two of the most popular jobs that the participants have mentioned when asked about what types of jobs that they have heard of were factory work and domestic work. Other jobs that were mentioned are in Figure 1 below. Most of the participants stated that they heard about these opportunities through the media, especially the radio, and their relatives and neighbours.

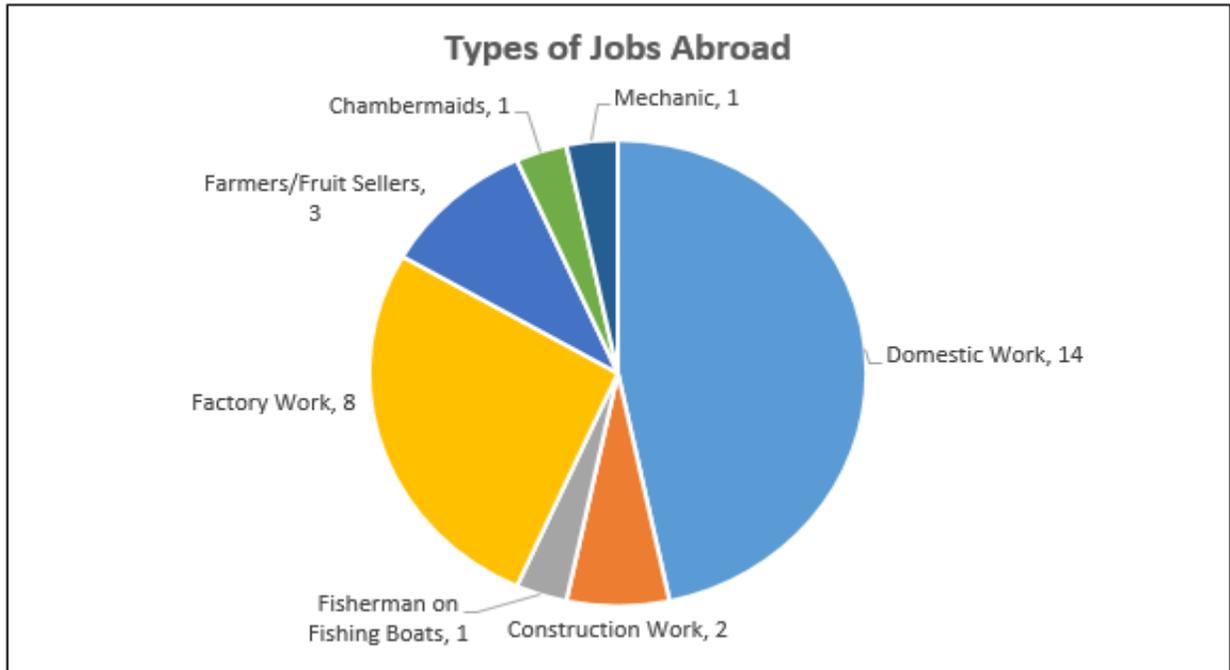


Figure 1. Types of Job Opportunities Available Overseas

Interest in and Attitudes of Working Overseas

Even though a majority of them are aware of the jobs available overseas, eight of the participants were not interested in applying as they do not want to be away from their families and friends. Out of the eight, three of the participants mentioned that they were afraid of being placed into a bad working condition after hearing cases of abuse from their families and friends who have returned from working abroad. Six participants expressed their interest in working abroad mainly due to the high income expectations that might help them to build a better life for their family. Four participants stated that they would only go if they know that the working conditions are not harsh and that they would not be abused by the employers. The rest of the participants were interested in the jobs abroad but responded that they could not do so due to family obligations.

Perception of Malaysia versus Singapore

When asked about their perception on whether Malaysia and Singapore are good places to work, the majority of the participants were unsure as they have never heard or seen the working environment in the two countries. The participants stated that whether it is a good or bad place to work depends on the employer that they have. Five participants particularly mentioned that Malaysia is not an ideal place to work as they have heard about the employers abusing the employees. Only two participants

mentioned that Singapore is an ideal place to work as the working conditions are good and salary expectations are high.

3. Perceived Domestic Work

Salary

17 out of 25 of the women interviewed at Riverkids expected a high salary for a FDW. They would like to work abroad as a FDW if the salary is as high as \$200 to \$300 per month. As they have to be away from their family and the job requires them to go abroad, they presumed that their salary should be more than the salary that they already have in Cambodia and high enough to support their family. One woman mentioned that the salary should allow them to give their children good education. 17 women at Riverkids had the desire to go overseas but because of family commitments, they remain in Cambodia.

Job scope

20 out of 25 of the women interviewed mentioned that a FDW's job scope is to do every household chore in the house. According to them, a FDW should be able to cook, clean the house, mop the floor, wash the dishes, wash the toilet, do the laundry, look after the house, look after the employer's children and even look after the elderly in the family. The majority of them thought that the work they do is similar to the things they were doing at home, thus classifying these duties similar to a stay home mother. Only one woman thought otherwise. Another women also mentioned that a FDW should not be doing work beyond her capability such as carrying heavy things and should not work outside of the house such as the employer's workplace.

Working hours

Six of the participants thought that there was a fixed hour to working as a FDW. They perceived that the FDW would start work at around 6 a.m. or 7 a.m. and end work in the evening at around 6 p.m.. Four women mentioned that there should be a break in between for the FDW to rest and they believed that it is crucial to rest as the FDW have to work whole day. One of them stated her ideal working hours for FDW in which the worker would start work from 6 a.m. to 11 a.m. before resuming their work at 2 p.m. till evening.

For another six out of the 25 of the women, they were unsure of the working hours of a FDW. They could not estimate how long a FDW should work. This is because they will be working in a house, involving housework which has to be constantly done. One

woman gave an example that housework will still have to be continued during their break time if there is still a list of chores to be completed. Another woman also added that, the employers should not force workers to work overtime such as working in the middle of the night when the FDW is supposed to be resting.

Employers

Seven women mentioned that their working conditions depend on their employers. They were more worried about getting to know their employers than to carry out their job as a domestic worker itself. They were afraid of getting an unkind employer who may abuse or hit them. Thus, to them, a good working experience depends on the kindness of the employers. One participant mentioned that working as a FDW is not only about the salary but also about the rights of the workers. They want employers to honour and appreciate them and not treat FDWs like 'animals or a slave'. The salary should be enough for the amount of work that they have done. The women also wanted to be allowed to contact their family members and should not be locked in the house. Hence, they perceived that working experience as a FDW will be better if they are able to meet good employers.

CASE STUDIES

Several NGOs (TWC2, LICADHO, LSCW, ADHOC and HOME) provided the researchers with insights regarding the recruitment process, problems these FDWs faced and problems of reintegration. In addition, two out of the 25 women from Riverkids were returned FDWs from Malaysia. They will be referred to as Sa Mon and Lina. The following points include their responses as well as those derived from the NGO case studies.

1. Recruitment Process

NGOs stated that potential FDWs are recruited via advertisements through the means of radio, television and word of mouth. The two women gave similar response where Sa Mon was recruited by her aunt while Lina knew about this job from radio and television advertisements. Lina stated that the agency that recruited her was Human Power.

Both women were informed that the first few months of their salary will be deducted for the initial cost of hiring such as for recruitment, visa and passport. All four NGOs also mentioned about salary deductions during the recruitment process which in turn leads to a debt bondage where the FDW has already incurred a debt even before she starts work and has to pay this debt, sometimes with interest, through salary deductions.

Unless they are able to pay the debt, they will not be able to leave the job with ease. Some NGOs stated that some FDWs did not get their salary as promised by the recruitment agency/ broker. However, this was not true for Sa Mon and Lina because they received their promised salary of \$180/month and \$150/month respectively.

Once recruited, the women will be sent to training on skills needed for basic household chores. Language workshops, usually for English, are conducted which span from a few days to a few months with different modes of training. For Sa Mon, she had three months of English workshop while Lina was only taught basic English for a few days. During the period of training, these women stayed at the company's house. The NGOs interviewed also added that women may also stay at the training centres during this time.

As for the signing of contracts, both LSCW and LICADHO stated that there are different contracts to be signed at home and destination countries. However, this was not evident in the interviews with Sa Mon and Lina because Sa Mon only signed one contract in Cambodia and Lina did not sign any contract at all.

Upon reaching the destination country, the passports of FDWs are taken away and kept by the agency or their employers. This point was confirmed by Sa Mon and Lina.

2. Problems Faced by Individuals Working as Foreign Domestic Workers

Since both Sa Mon and Lina had good experiences from working as a FDW, they did not face any problems while working in Malaysia.

On the other hand, LSCW stated that exploitation may happen in the form of unpaid salary, long working hours, restrictions including confiscation of documents as well as sexual and psychological abuse. LICADHO also added other possible problems FDWs may face while working overseas including no off-days and verbal abuse. Although there were such cases before, both NGOs gave reasons to why these women kept silent despite the poor treatment they received. The majority of these individuals have no access to any form of communication with their families in Cambodia. Moreover, they were living under the scrutiny of abusive employers and the embassy was not doing anything to assist them. Some Cambodian FDWs also do not trust the system of redress in Cambodia or were unsure of where/ who to seek help from.

3. Problems of Reintegration

NGOs mentioned that the main problem of reintegration FDWs faced, especially those who had problems overseas, is to find a suitable job. Many women lack the skills to work in other jobs because they are only trained in domestic work. On the other hand, some women also find that it is difficult to return to their village because they owe their villagers money and feel ashamed when they return to their village in a worse condition before they left which may result in gossip around the village.

CONCLUSION

In summary, women in the community are at risk to unsafe working conditions and are vulnerable to exploitation if they chose to work abroad as FDWs. With the limited education and inability to understand or communicate in a language apart from Khmer, these women may not be able to sufficiently understand their job scope unless they are appropriately and accurately informed and trained. Otherwise, these women will believe that their perceptions are true and valid. Some of the key findings of the research are as follows:

- Women in the community are at risk to unsafe working conditions and are vulnerable to being exploited as they do not have high education or adequate awareness about safe migration
- 14 out of the 25 women are aware of the job opportunities as a domestic worker abroad
- Women in Riverkids have the desire to work abroad but because of their commitment with their family, they have to work in Cambodia
- 18 of the women in the community are unsure of working in countries such as Malaysia and Singapore since they have not heard anything about these countries.
- 17 out of 25 women interviewed at Riverkids expected a high salary for a FDW of as high as \$200 to \$300 per month
- 20 out of 25 women interviewed mentioned that a FDW's job scope is to do every household chores in the house.
- Six women presumed that there is a fixed timing to working as a FDW whereas another six women could not estimate the timing as they think housework needs to be constantly done.
- Seven women viewed working experience as a FDW as better if they are able to meet good employers.

1. Recommendations

Based on the research, some of the programmes that can be conducted by Riverkids are as follows:

- Riverkids can provide awareness in communities by having talks or brochures about what it is like to work as a FDW with explanations on the working hours, job scope, salary and typical expectations of employers
- Riverkids can keep in touch with returned women from Singapore and Malaysia and have these women to share their experiences working as a FDW abroad to communities, with the returnees' permission
- Riverkids can refer women who have returned from Singapore or Malaysia to NGOs such as Chab Dai or ADHOC that provide counselling services for those who suffer from trauma as a result of abuse in work places
- Riverkids can conduct briefings to women about safe migration prior to their departure
- During the briefing, Riverkids can provide a name card with all the important contact numbers that they may need when they are abroad such as the contact number of NGOs in Singapore or Malaysia, NGOs in Cambodia as well as the Cambodian embassy in the country.

2. Areas for Further Research

Further research can be conducted after the ban to send FDWs to Malaysia is lifted. The research would then be a basis of comparison and find out whether the situations and perceptions of these women on domestic work overseas remains the same or have changed.

APPENDIX

Future FDWs

Women Vulnerable to Unsafe Migration as FDWs (Cambodia)

Participant's Background

1. Name (pseudonym):
2. Age:
3. Highest education:
4. Current occupation:
5. How long at this occupation:
6. Income from this occupation (specify weekly, monthly, daily etc):
7. Marital status:
8. Number of Children:
9. Number of Dependents (if different from above):
10. Number of individuals working in your household:
11. Total monthly household income:
12. Total monthly household expenditure:
13. Can you tell us something about yourself?

Knowledge of Working Abroad (generally and as FDW)

1. Have you heard about opportunities for Cambodian women to work abroad? (Yes or Not):
2. What types of jobs have you heard about (and which countries you go to do them)?
3. How did you hear about these jobs?
4. Have you heard about opportunities to work in Singapore or Malaysia as a domestic helper (Yes, No)?
5. How did you hear about this type of job?
6. Since hearing of this job as a domestic helper abroad, are you interested to apply (why, why not)?
7. Has anyone approached you about such a job opportunity (a recruiter)? (If yes, what did they say?)

Planning to go Singapore or Malaysia:

1. In your opinion, would Singapore and Malaysia be a good place to go for work (why/ not)?
2. Have you taken any further steps to go abroad as a domestic helper (like contacting an agency)?
3. If yes, can you tell us more about what steps you have taken?
4. What are your expectations about working as a FDW in Singapore or Malaysia (income, remittances, lifestyle and so on)?
5. In your opinion, what would working as a FDW like for you? Hours? Tasks to do?

If you have already been to an agency:

1. What kind of information did the agency give you about the job conditions, salary, and any costs?
2. Did the agency or any other organisation give you any information about what to do if something goes wrong (eg. your employer hurts you, or doesn't pay your salary properly) (if yes, what)?
3. What do you think the job scope (duties) of a foreign domestic worker would be like?
4. Have you gone for any training? If so, what kind of training?
5. In your imagination, can you describe what you think Singapore or Malaysia is like (as a place to live and work)?
6. Do you know anyone (neighbour/ friend) who is planning to go abroad as a domestic worker?

7. Do you know anyone (neighbour/ friend) who is currently abroad as a domestic worker? Or had been and is back?
8. If yes what was the country and the feedback about that experience?

Returned FDWs

Women Vulnerable to Unsafe Migration as FDWs (Cambodia)

Participant's Background

1. Name (pseudonym):
2. Age:
3. Highest education:
4. Current occupation:
5. How long at this occupation:
6. Income from this occupation (specify weekly, monthly, daily etc):
7. Marital status:
8. Number of Children:
9. Number of Dependents (if different from above):
10. Number of individuals working in your household:
11. Total monthly household income:
12. Total monthly household expenditure:
13. Can you tell us something about yourself?

Experience of Working Abroad (generally and as FDW)

1. Which country have you returned from?
2. What types of jobs did you do while you were working as a domestic helper?
3. How was your working experience as a domestic worker?
(Good or bad? Why?)
4. Did you go through any trainings before you start working?
(Yes or no?)

Perception of Singapore

1. What is your impression of Singapore or Malaysia?
2. What is your perception about working in Singapore?
3. What did you expect from working as a FDW in Singapore?
4. If you were from province/city, how were your living conditions there?
5. What do you think the job scope of a foreign domestic worker is like?
6. How did you feel about coming to work in Singapore?

Recruitment Process

1. How did you get to know the agency? Is it by word of mouth, recommendations from family and friends, advertisements from others, posters? If it is by word of mouth, what did they say? How did they persuade you?
2. What was the name of the agency that recruited you?
3. How did the agencies do the recruitment? (they may not know this only for their case)
4. What did the agency tell you? (about migrating such as cost, types of work, contract conditions, working hours, living arrangements)
5. How much did you pay for the recruitment fees? Do you know what you are paying for? (Any other costs such as medical and air ticket?)
(How much of this was divided between Cambodia agency, Cambodia recruiter and Singapore agency?)
6. What was the promised salary? (For how many months?)
7. Were there any salary deductions that you agreed to? (If so, what was the deductions for? E.g. for your food, transport, accommodation)
8. What kinds of contracts/ documents did you have to sign? What were they for?

9. How did you prepare yourself prior to your migration? How did the agency prepare you for migration?

Training in Cambodia

1. What kinds of trainings were provided for you before coming to Singapore? Were they specialised training such as childcare, elderly care, household chores?
2. Did you attend any English workshops?
3. Where did you stay during your training? What were the conditions of the training centres like?
4. Did you keep your personal belongings such as your passport with you? If not, who is/are in possession of them?
5. Were you informed of contacts that you can refer to in case of emergency such as the Singapore agency, the Cambodian embassy and outline?

Training and Placement in Singapore

1. Who did you contact with once you reached Singapore? May we know the agency?
2. What did they ask you to do the moment you reach Singapore? Did they take any important documents from you? If yes, what were they?
3. What were the trainings provided? Were you taught how to use the equipment such as the microwave oven and washing machine? Please list down in details.
4. What was exactly you expect it to be? Is it different? Is it worse than that?
5. How was your treatment at the training centre?
6. What was the salary that you received?
7. How much was your debt? Or how much do you have to pay for the trainings and food?
8. Were there any other things did you have to pay to the agency? If yes, what were they?
9. Were you aware about where to go to if you had problems with your employers?
10. Do you feel safe working in Singapore or working with your employers? If no, why?

On-the-Job Working Conditions

1. Do you feel you are about to move around freely? If no, why? (Do you have your own private space and personal time?)
2. How were your conditions over there with your employers? (Such as your working, eating, living, going out, sleeping)
3. How did you keep in touch with your family at home?
4. How did you keep in touch with your fellow Cambodians in Singapore?

5. How did you communicate with your employers? How did you cope with communicating with them?
6. Did you sign an employment contract regarding the information agreed between you and your employer?
7. Did you keep your personal belongings such as your passport and work permit with you? If not, who is/are in possession of them?
8. How long were you at the agency?
9. Would you recommend your friends and relatives at home to work as a domestic worker?
10. How did you manage to find help in Singapore?
11. Did you report your case to the police? If not, why?
12. Do you know your rights here in Singapore?

Reintegration

1. Who arranged it for you to go home?
2. How did your family react when you are home? Did you tell them about your problems?
3. What are the types of challenges you faced when you came home?
4. Was there any help that you receive at home or by NGOs at home? What are the types of help did you receive? Did it help you?
5. What are your hopes and plans for the future?
6. Do you plan to work as a FDW again? Why? Why not?
7. What advice would you give to those who want to work as FDW in Singapore?
8. What do you need working as a FDW in Singapore? Or what type of support do you wish you could have in Singapore if you encounter problems working there again?
9. What are your future plans?