

THEME : MIGRANT WORKERS : Confinement

Around 300,000 low-wage migrant workers, particularly those in the construction, shipyard and cleaning sectors, are housed in worker dormitories. Since April 2020, they have been confined to their accommodation except when taken out to work by their employers or when allowed to go out with permission from the government.

Their right to free enjoyment of their leisure time has been badly undermined. Allowed merely 3 hours a week (see footnote*), they can only go to nearby shops for essential errands. There is no time to socialise with friends and relatives who stay elsewhere, to visit places of worship or to visit and consult with help organisations.

Workers report growing frustration and mental distress. There have been reported cases of self-harm.

Roots of the problem

Starting in late March 2020, clusters of Covid-19 were discovered among migrant workers living in dormitories. All dormitories were locked down.

However, since 4th quarter 2020, there have been virtually no more Covid-19 cases among them. The handful of cases detected were successfully isolated through the usual contact tracing methods.

The rest of Singapore is almost back to normal with no movement restrictions. Yet dorm-based workers are still not allowed to leave their accommodation unless transported to work by their employers, or unless they get an exit pass through a smartphone app from the

government – limited to one 3-hour slot per week*. Their situation is a form of internment.

Private parties such as employers and dormitory operators are also known to add layers of control forbidding workers from leaving their dormitories.

National framework

Confinement of workers inside dormitories was put into subsidiary legislation (by-laws) in September 2020. Such laws did not exist before.

Singapore has sufficiently effective legislation under the Infectious Diseases Act to impose quarantines where needed.

Recommendations from prior cycles

This being a new issue springing from Covid-19, and there being no legislation before the pandemic restricting the movements of migrant workers, there were no related recommendations in previous cycles.

Suggested recommendations

1. Repeal all legislation and policies restricting the movement of migrant workers out of their dormitories and guarantee their right to freedom of movement by ensuring that private parties such as employers and dormitory operators do not interfere with this right.

***Update, 5 March 2021:** The government announced that the previous limit of 3 hours a week will be increased. Dormitory-based migrant workers will be allowed to go out of their dorms three times a week for up to 4 hours each time. They still need to apply for permission through a government app. Migrant workers thus continue to find their right to freedom of movement restricted.