

More maids say they do not get enough to eat

By Chang May Choon, [The Straits Times](#)

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Just two months after she started working for her new employer in August, Anya saw her weight drop to 47kg - a loss of 9kg - See more at: The 29-year-old domestic worker gets a slice of bread for breakfast, bread or instant noodles for lunch, and rice with only vegetables for dinner.

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"I'd hide in the toilet and cry because I was so hungry and upset," said the Filipino, who did not want to give her full name. "I'm scared to ask for more food, because the auntie is always nagging about the peanut butter finishing so fast," she added.

While the malnourishment of foreign maids here is not a new problem, it might have grown worse, say advocacy groups.

As many as eight in 10 domestic workers who seek help from the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home) do not get enough food, said Ms Valli Pillai, its director of case work.

Home said it saw a 20 per cent rise in complaints about poor or insufficient food from 2012 to last year.

No cooking, but workers' catered food 'unpalatable'

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Complaints galore about meals; few get to do their own cooking

WHILE some dormitories allow foreign workers to cook, many have to rely on food provided by caterers hired by the dormitory operator or their employer.

The food is often unpalatable, according to welfare groups which work with foreign workers, such as **Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics** (Home). Besides the lack of taste, foreign workers complain that the food is not cooked properly or is prepared in an unhygienic way.

This issue made news last week when about 200 foreign workers staged a protest in Tampines over unpaid salaries.

The men, who work for Sunway Concrete Products and Techcom Construction &

Trading, also claimed that the food served at their worksite was not edible.

They each had to pay \$130 monthly for three meals a day. A worker from Sunway, who wanted to be known only as Mr K., 29, said that lunch consisted of rice and vegetables or chicken curry. Dinner was similar but with an extra piece of fried fish. They could eat as much rice as they wanted but were given a fixed serving of curry and fish.

Techcom employee Salauddin, 25, a Bangladeshi who goes by one name, said: "The food is not fresh and there's no taste. We work so hard but we're still hungry. I don't eat the food that the company provides any more... My money has gone to waste."

Mr Jolovan Wham, executive director of Home, hears of food complaints "all the time" from migrant workers. "It usually comes to light when I ask them about it. I've heard the food is not substantial, badly cooked or unhygienic," he added, recalling how a construction worker from China once found a cockroach in his meal box.

Mr A.K.M. Mohsin, editor of a local Bengali newspaper who interacts frequently with migrant workers, has heard of caterers who buy poor-quality vegetables cheaply from shops.

He noted that many workers were forced to eat the food that employers provided because their dormitories did not allow them to cook. "Some people say Singapore is very clean, there are rules and everything is very systematic but they don't even care about whether the worker's food is hygienic," he said.

Under work permit conditions, employers are responsible and must bear the cost of the worker's upkeep here, including providing adequate food and medical treatment.

Some dormitories, like the one operated by Keppel Offshore & Marine, have facilities to allow workers to cook while others let them buy their own meals. Those who have to rely on catered food are usually charged between \$120 and \$160 a month for three meals a day.

Foreign workers claimed that caterers usually prepare lunch the night before, at about 10pm. These packets would be picked up by the workers, along with a packed breakfast which might include bread or roti prata, before they head to work. Lunch and dinner often consist of copious amounts of rice, one piece of fish or meat, vegetables and curry.

Construction worker Kamruzzaman, 33, who goes by one name, said: "The food is always cold by the time we eat it for lunch. The curry is often watery. The fish is usually not washed properly and has a bad smell." The Bangladeshi now buys his

own meals after he joined a new company four months ago.

But a caterer, who declined to be named, said cooking at two dormitories it had contracts with starts at about 3am, to cater to some 3,000 workers at each residence who need their food by 7am.

It stressed that labels indicating the time limit within which food should be consumed are pasted on all meal boxes.

"After the food is cooked, it's kept in warmers till the workers collect it," its spokesman said. "We also encourage employers to pick up the lunch packets later in the morning so it will remain fresh."

According to the National Environment Agency's guidelines on food hygiene, caterers are advised not to prepare food too early before they are eaten. Its guidelines state that if food has to be prepared earlier, it should be stored at above 60 deg C or below 5 deg C. It is an offence to store packed food outside these temperatures for more than four hours after preparation.