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From Myanmar to Singapore: Why the maid trafficking continues

Despite an official ban and widespread condemnation, the trade of underage girls from Myanmar to Singapore continues to thrive.

By Lynn Lee and James Leong

Al Jazeera (02.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2H7LeCx> - When we first heard about a 15-year-old domestic worker from Myanmar seeking help at a shelter in Singapore in 2016, we thought it was an isolated case. But at the shelter, we met three other teenage maids from Myanmar who'd also run away from their employers. One said she'd been physically abused; another fled after her male employer asked her to take a shower with him; a third told us she'd been raped.

Why were children working in Singapore? How did they even get here? We decided to investigate.

In our [2016 documentary](#), we uncovered a thriving trade in the trafficking of underage girls from Myanmar to Singapore. We discovered that this was happening despite laws in both countries designed to prevent the exploitation of vulnerable young women.

In 2014, Myanmar banned all female citizens from leaving to become domestic workers overseas. But we learned that, in villages across the country, recruiters were still telling impoverished families their lives would improve if they let their daughters go to Singapore.

What they didn't say, of course, was that doing so was illegal and that there would be risks involved. What the agents got in return was a cut of the hefty recruitment fees the girls were obliged to pay.

According to Singapore legislation, domestic workers in the wealthy island state must be at least 23 years old. However, agents regularly bribe officials in Myanmar's Immigration Department to alter birth dates on passports, allowing them to send underage girls into the country.

Some of the girls we met were barely out of their teens, but with fake documents, they were able to avoid detection in Singapore. They told us that before leaving Myanmar, their agents would instruct them to never tell anyone their real age.

The documentary went viral both in Singapore and Myanmar. But 18 months later, we discovered that very little changed. The trafficking continues.

Young, vulnerable and alone

In 2017, we heard of a series of incidents involving domestic workers from Myanmar falling from high-rise buildings in Singapore. When we investigated, we found out that at

least two cases involved teenagers and realised that, despite widespread publicity, underage girls from Myanmar were still coming to Singapore.

Over six months, we visited Myanmar multiple times and tracked down the families of two girls who'd fallen from their employers' apartments. The first girl, Wain Wain, died less than a month after arriving in Singapore. We met her family, who were clearly grieving and in shock.

Ironically, their neighbours insisted that the agent who'd recruited Wain Wain was not to blame. The same recruiter had sent at least 60 village girls to Singapore and was seen as a "benefactor" who was helping lift the community out of poverty.

"Because of them, parents can earn money. Parents let them go as we are poor," says one of the villagers who sent two of her daughters to work in Singapore. "Let's say you're an employer from Singapore; you can't come directly to us. Because of the agents, we can work there. So we are grateful to them."

The second girl, Zin Zin, was just 15 when she left for Singapore with high hopes to support her family. She returned home severely injured and will likely need long-term care.

She identified the man she said helped get her a passport with a fake date of birth as Louis Zung, a member of Myanmar's parliament and founder of a company called Myanmar Global Manpower Link, the same agency we exposed in 2016.

Zung denied he was involved in any wrongdoing. However, he confirmed he remained a director of the company until 2016, two years after the ban on recruiting women to work overseas.

I often think about Wain Wain and her mysterious death. She allegedly committed suicide after being in Singapore for just a few weeks. Her sister can't believe it.

"She's not the type of person. She wouldn't dare. Her intention after our father died was to give our mother her own house," Wain Wain's sister told us.

It's likely we'll never know for sure what led to the tragedy. She was young, vulnerable and alone. And now she's gone.
