

Publication: Business Standard

Date: 4 November 2015

Headline: 6 in 10 migrant workers in Singapore at risk of mental illness

6 in 10 migrant workers in Singapore at risk of mental illness

PUBLISHED ON NOVEMBER 4, 2015

A majority of migrant workers in Singapore including those from India are at high risk of serious mental illness mainly due to deportation threat and lack of housing facility, according to a study released today.

The causes behind mental illness include deportation threats from employers, debt related to agent fee for getting jobs in Singapore and salary disputes/claims, according to the Singapore Management University (SMU) study.

It said that 62 per cent of surveyed South Asian migrant workers in Singapore with an injury or salary claim with the Ministry of Manpower and 13 per cent of surveyed regular workers are likely to suffer from serious mental illness.

The main drivers of emotional distress among workers surveyed were the threats of deportation from employers, agent fee debt and lack of housing for workers who have run away from their employers, the study said.

Nicholas Harrigan, the research co-author and SMU School of Social Sciences' Assistant Professor of Sociology said, "We were particularly surprised by the prevalence of emotional distress among injured workers. The high rates of threats of deportation among workers with injury and salary claims with the manpower ministry were also worrying. If workers fear deportation, it makes them much less likely to report mistreatment."

It is crucial to understand the welfare issues confronting low-paid migrant workers, estimated nearly one million or a third of the local workforce, said the SMU. Most of the migrant workers in the low-paying labour-intensive industries such as shipyards and construction sites are from India, China and Bangladesh.

"The findings from this study on this vital yet vulnerable group could have socio-economic impact on Singapore," the study said.

The study, also co-authored by SMU alumna Koh Chiu Yee, was launched with a presentation and panel discussion at the university. The panelists included senior representatives from the non-government organisations, Transient Workers Count Too and Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics as well as Silver Ribbon Singapore which promotes positive mental health.